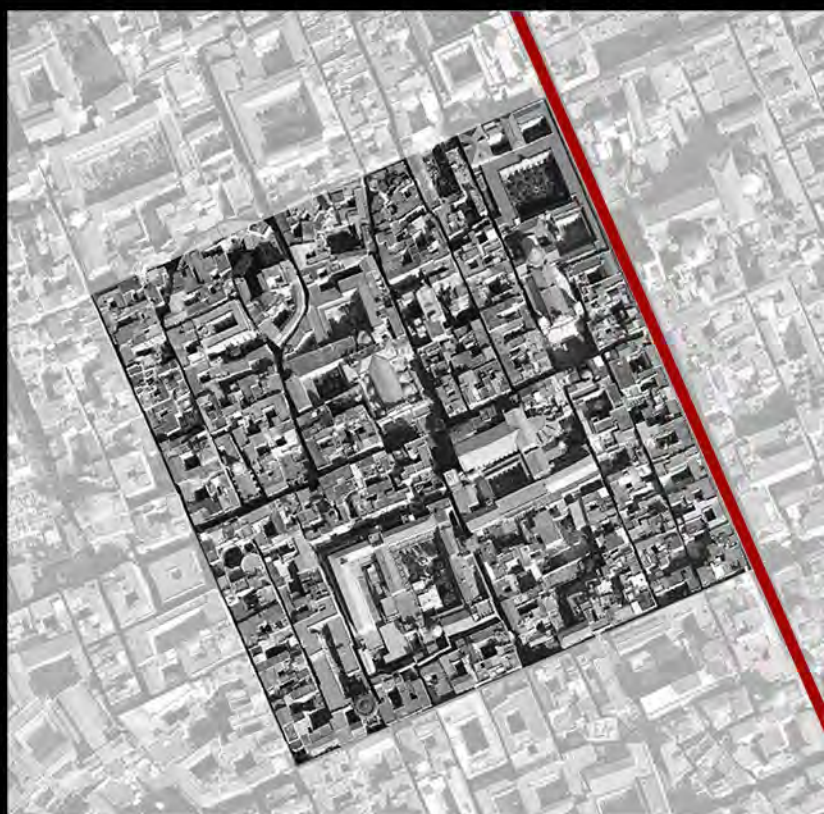


# **La Città Palinsesto**

## **The City as Palimpsest**

**Tracce, sguardi e narrazioni  
sulla complessità dei contesti urbani storici**

Tracks, views and narrations  
on the complexity of historical urban contexts



**Tomo primo**  
**Memorie, storie, immagini**  
**Memories, stories, images**

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Tomo I - *Memorie, storie, immagini*

a cura di Francesca CAPANO e Massimo VIGONE

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## Rewriting History on the Façade of Saint-Denis

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### Abstract

*In 2015, the French Ministry of Culture unveiled the western façade of the basilica of Saint-Denis restored to its appearance during the era of François Debret, site architect from 1813 to 1846. Renewing Debret's version of the façade revives his concept of Saint-Denis as an expression of unified French history. This reinscription of a specific version of heritage on the façade is significant given current attempts to revitalize the diverse commune of Saint-Denis via tourism in an era of debated French identity.*

### Keywords

Saint-Denis, façade, restoration.

### Introduction

In August 2015, following a three-year process, the French Ministry of Culture unveiled the restored western façade of the former abbey church (current basilica) of Saint-Denis. The façade was truly restored, not merely cleaned, and restored not to its medieval appearance, but to its appearance as established by François Debret, the chief architect of the site from 1813 to 1846. Debret had intervened in the façade's appearance by resurfacing much of the fabric, including recutting existing sculpture, and inventing polychrome ornament and sculptural detail. The 2015 restoration of the façade is part of an extended process of renewal: currently, the façade of Saint-Denis faces a relatively new parvis, completed in 2007 to make the area more friendly to pedestrians and to more clearly define the center of town (*Piétonisation du centre-ville*). The parvis replaces a street and parking area in front of the building, clearing viewers' access and lines of sight to the façade. The north tower of the façade, absent since 1846 following Debret's career-ending restoration and subsequent dismantling, is in the initial phases of a rebuilding process meant to fully reinstate Debret's design [Evin 2019]. Choosing to bring back the vision of Debret is a part of a general reconsideration of Debret's reputation, but is also a way to revive his vision of the building, until recently a source of much criticism, as a functional locus of French history at a time characterized by sustained debate over what it means to be French.

1. Promotional material for tourism in the Seine-Saint-Denis department emphasizes that the Saint-Denis façade may be inspired by Debret, but restores the building's 'original' appearance and the «spirit of Abbot Suger» [Willsher, Harrap 2020]. The 'original' appearance of the façade, i.e. the vision of the façade as executed during the time of Abbot Suger, is not fully known; Suger does not fully describe his intentions, which in any case would have been mediated by the planning and execution of the builders. Suger clearly wanted a towered façade, but it seems highly unlikely that the towers were completed during his lifetime [Brown 2020, 43-72]. In *De Administratione* and *De Consecratione*, he outlines plans for a towered,



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*1: Façade of Saint-Denis, 2018. Author's own photograph.*

triple-ported western block with gilded, inscribed doors, though he states that only one tower was finished and work would continue on the other [Suger, Gasparri 1996, 13, 25, 113-121]. He notes his decision to place a mosaic above one portal [Suger, Gasparri 1996, 117], and we have evidence of the other tympana and jamb figures from pre-19<sup>th</sup> century depictions and from more recent examinations of surviving sculpture. As construction continued after Suger's time, there is no one moment in time when a complete 'original' façade existed. The façade underwent additional alterations as centuries passed. A drawing by Étienne Martellange, completed in the 1620s or 1630s, shows a clock installed in the rose window.<sup>1</sup> The north tower was struck by lightning and repaired at least three times prior to the nineteenth century [Delaborde 1882, 319-20; Wyss 1996, 59, 61], and likely many more times that went undocumented. The trumeau of the central portal and the jamb figures of all three portals were removed during renovations in 1770-1771, both to facilitate processional entrances and due to deterioration [Blum 1992, 7]. While the royal tombs and treasury were despoiled during the French Revolution, neglect seems to have been the greatest threat to the west façade in the 1790s.

2. In 1813, François Debret succeeded Jacques Cellier as the main architect at Saint-Denis. His projects – the addition of a new chapel and vestuary for the re-established chapter; consolidation of the structure; replacing the royal tombs; and replacing stained glass, sometimes with contemporary royal themes like a visit by Louis-Philippe – reveal his restoration philosophy: not merely conserving the medieval fabric but maintaining and expanding the building's function as a royal church in practice. Debret planned to spend quite a lot on the façade, and submitted a detailed estimate in 1837 for a total of 1,160,000FF, much of which would be dedicated to the west façade and towers [Léniard 2012, 87]. As is documented in Debret's records on Saint-Denis, and confirmed by analysis of the stone of the façade [Blum, Blanc, Holmes, Johnson 1994, 19], he altered the sculpture of the archivolts and tympana; above the first row of arcading on the north and south sides, he added small corbeled statues of Saints Peter, Paul, Matthew, and Barnabas; above those statues, he created a molding with ornamental panels; he created diaper and chevron patterns within the blind arcades; he added inscriptions to the central arcading; he inserted roundels of the Evangelists around the rose window/clock; above the windows on the north and south sides, he added an additional shorter row of blind arcading with reliefs of Merovingian, Carolingian, and Capetian kings associated with the building: Clovis, Dagobert, Pepin, Charlemagne, Hugh, Robert the Pious, Louis VI, and Louis VII; and he added blind arches and moldings to the upper segments of the four wall buttresses, creating a strong horizontal connection between the divisions of the façade. Debret's work involved significant resurfacing across the entire façade; critics claimed he scraped off and replaced several centimeters of depth [Léniard 1993, 39]. The Académie des belles lettres assisted with Latin for his inscriptions, indicating that Debret was not replicating existing work or drawing on specific text sources<sup>2</sup>. The Commission des monuments historiques noted 'inaccuracies' at the time, for example that Suger's inscriptions were on the doors, not above the archivolts, and that the added statues were unprecedented. In the

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes Reserve-Ub-9-Boite FT 4, Étienne Martellange, *Veüe de l'Eglise de St Denis en France*, 1625-1639.

<sup>2</sup> Charenton, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Correspondance administrative de la Commission des monuments historiques, 1836-1851, 80/14/16, 1840-1841.

Commission's judgment, the facade had been nearly entirely remade, and if this had been truly necessary, Debret should have reproduced what was there prior<sup>3</sup>. Images of the façade prior to Debret's work show the clock in place, but no indication of a gallery of kings, the sculpted roundels around the rose window, the floral molding between the central and upper blind arcades, or any inscriptions<sup>4</sup>. An 18<sup>th</sup> century account by Michel Félibien mentions a statue of Dagobert enthroned below one of the façade's towers [Félibien 1706, 534], and Montfaucon's 1729 illustration shows a statue appropriate for Suger's era [Montfaucon 1729-33, pl. XII], but it does not appear to be the source for Debret's standing arcade of kings. His creation of additional royal imagery, particularly imagery expressing the historic royal ties of the building, can be seen as both defiance of Revolutionary desecration of royal sites (not only at Saint-Denis, but in connection with the attacks on the sculpted Gallery of Kings at Notre-Dame) and as a reminder to King Louis-Philippe, less involved with the building than his Bourbon predecessors, of the building's established royal patronage.

3. In keeping with both his title of architect and his employment under the *Batiments civils* (the council charged with administration of government buildings, rather than culture or conservation), Debret envisioned Saint-Denis as a functional building with an ongoing need for construction. A guidebook written early in Debret's tenure praised his work and that of his predecessors; the author's royalist sympathies are revealed in his attention to the interment of Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI, but his description of the building as «the most illustrious (example) of the piety and magnificence of the kings of France» illuminates Debret's intent [Gilbert 1815, 1]. Under Debret, the façade would serve to project royal authority and to connect that authority with the role of Saint-Denis's namesake in establishing Christianity in France, consolidating and reinforcing a unified history that glossed over the upheaval of the Revolution and the Empire. When his work came under increasing scrutiny following the establishment of the *Commission des monuments historiques* in 1837, he attempted to defend the accuracy of his restoration, claiming, for example, that the kings on the upper façade were justified by traces of earlier such sculptures. His sources, however, were less than definitive, and he relied more on the concept of the building as described in historical text – particularly on the idea that the building should summarize a history of royalty – than on archaeological evidence of its appearance, a problem in a time when concepts of restoration turned toward preserving the authenticity of the historical monument [Bercé, Foucart 2000, 33-34].

4. As unveiled in 2015, the façade recreates Debret's work. The clock has been reset in the central oculus and accented with blue and gold; Debret's sculptural additions have been restored; his red inscriptions reinstated. If the tower rebuilding continues, not only will the tower

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<sup>3</sup> Charenton, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Correspondance administrative de la Commission des monuments historiques, 1841-1876, 80/14/17, *Rapport sur la restauration de l'église royale de S-Denis, June 1841*.

<sup>4</sup> Vicenza, Museo Civico, MS. C. 42, Vincenzo Scamozzi, *Faccia della chiesa*, 1600; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, Reserve Ub-9-Boite FT 4, Étienne Martellange, *Veüe de l'Eglise de St Denis en France*, 1625-1639; F.T. Martinet, *Portail de l'Église de St.-Denis en France*, in J.C. Poncelin de La Roche-Tilhac, *Description historique de Paris, et de ses plus beaux monumens, gravés en taille-douce* (Paris, 1780), between 124-125; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, Reserve Ve-26 (G), Adrien Dauzats, *Église de Saint-Denis*, Christophe Civeton (?), *Église de Saint-Denis*.



be Debret's version, but the newness of its surface will not contrast with the clean, pale surface of the restored façade, minimizing signs of age and downplaying the diachronic nature of the work. In returning to Debret's vision, the current restoration at Saint-Denis cannot be stripped of its ideological context. In the nineteenth century, in the aftermath of upheaval and in the midst of industrialization that would transform the town of Saint-Denis, Debret sought to create a building with contemporary relevance grounded in medieval authority and drawing on the entwined power of both church and state, asserting hegemony over the commune through the inscription of these values on the façade. The current project renews that intent, expressing an uninterrupted chronology and a homogeneous culture within the suburb using the building's metaphorical face, glossing over Saint-Denis's racial, ethnic, and religiously diversity.

**5.** The nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of Saint-Denis from a village around the abbey to a growing working-class enclave, but the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen Saint-Denis become one of the most demographically diverse communes in France. While France does not allow for the collection of census information on race or religion, the high percentage of residents born in the Maghreb or West Africa (about 25% of the population of Saint-Denis in 2013 according to INSEE, the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques) means that a large number of Dionysiens are Arab or Black and Muslim; the population does not conform to traditional expectations of French identity that assume whiteness and Catholicism. Supporters of the Rassemblement National and other far-right groups reject the idea that such residents could have a claim to Frenchness equal to their own [Journal des Résistants]. Even in more mainstream society, the emphasis in French public policy on laïcité and assimilation favors a culturally unified French identity; this consolidated heritage, smoothing over the vast changes in France since the early nineteenth century, is presented on the restored façade.

**6.** The perception of Saint-Denis as a problematic banlieue is hard to divorce from its demographics. The disproportionate toll of COVID-19 in the Seine-Saint-Denis department – an effect correlated with race and ethnicity – highlights long-apparent systematic inequalities in access to jobs, health care, and housing [Willsher, Harrap 2020]. Prejudices about race and religion, as well as associations with terrorism, feed the public perception of Saint-Denis as dangerous; Saint-Denis may be remembered as the site where perpetrators of the 2015 ISIS attack on Paris were arrested. In recent years, investment in infrastructure has been proffered as a key means of revitalization, with the assumption that Saint-Denis's image needs rehabilitation to draw tourists. The development of the Olympic Village for the 2024 games in Saint-Denis offers the most obvious example (and is much less historically entangled), but promoters of the restoration of Saint-Denis's façade have explicitly pitched the project as a tourist attraction, comparing their tourism numbers with Notre-Dame's and acknowledging the need to change the commune's reputation with new or renewed attractions. In a 2018 article, Luc Fauchois, vice-president of restoration advocacy group Suivez la flèche, bluntly stated «J'ose espérer que les gens vont se rendre compte qu'ils peuvent venir à Saint-Denis sans être agressé à tous les coins de rue» («I dare to hope that people are going to realize that they can come to Saint-Denis without being attacked on every street corner») [Chiron 2018]. The renewed façade, soon to have a north tower again, asserts a mythical past without

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acknowledging the changes of the present, appealing to visitors drawn to a romanticized, reductive narrative of French history.

### Conclusion

As in the Middle Ages, a cathedral's façade is the most effective and most visible way for the building to communicate with its viewers, as demonstrated by the interests of both iconoclasts and preservationists. It cannot be coincidental that so much energy has been devoted to the façade restoration at Saint-Denis, particularly as none of the changes to the façade are necessary to the building's function or security. Local arts programming also speaks to the significance of the façade as a site of communication and negotiation of ownership. In 2017, the Centre des monuments nationaux (CMN), which manages the east end of Saint-Denis, and Franciade, a heritage organization in Saint-Denis, partnered to sponsor «La basilique vue de leurs fenêtres» (the basilica from their windows). Local photographer Aïman Saad Ellaoui supervised the show, for which some 50 residents of Saint-Denis were photographed and interviewed about their feelings about the basilica. The resulting words and images were projected on the façade in December 2017. The show launched a larger project, «À nous la basilique!» (the basilica is ours), which brings together writers, artists, and actors for activities and publications intended to reappropriate the basilica of Saint-Denis for the community – perhaps needed, as about half of those interviewed for «La basilique vue de leurs fenêtres» had never entered the building [Longuet 2017] – further demonstrating the significance of the façade, as it reaches all viewers rather than only churchgoers and tourists. Such a show could be considered as a kind of counterprogramming to the façade restoration, as it engages with the diverse population of the commune; rather than portraying a heritage that would seem to exclude many Dionysiens, the show found common ground in individual experiences of the building as a landmark.

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