

The Pont Mirabeau, Photography, and Urban Collectivities in Third Republic Paris

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Abstract

When the Pont Mirabeau was completed in 1896, it was the longest and tallest bridge in Paris and established an internationally acclaimed model for steel bridge construction. As much as the bridge was a spectacle of engineering, its creation also responded to the needs of Parisians. Beginning in 1877, property owners, industrialists, and shopkeepers in the fifteenth and sixteenth arrondissements had called for a new bridge to ease traffic across the Seine near the Javel Bleach Factory in western Paris. In 1888, 6,500 residents from these neighborhoods signed a petition pressuring the city to consider the project. In response, the Municipal Council drove the project forward in the early 1890s, evidencing Parisians' renewed agency in shaping their city during the Third Republic. As the public opinion became more amplified, Parisians increasingly mediated the choices concerning urban projects in the capital. In turn, these building campaigns were mediated by a network of publicity as a means to communicate to this mass audience. Thus, the planning and execution of the Pont Mirabeau was accompanied by photographs, presentation renderings, posters, pamphlets, and press reports, which turned the bridge's planning and construction into a mediatized public event capturing the popular imagination of Parisians. This paper focuses on a bound photographic album executed by Félix Nadar's studio whose images also circulated in the illustrated press and at universal expositions. These remarkably crisp black-and-white photographs were commissioned by state engineers and played a privileged role in publicizing the bridge's construction through new photographic technologies in the 1880s and 1890s, including faster shutter speeds, film emulsions, silver gelatin dry plates, and halftone printing. This essay investigates the significance of the Pont Mirabeau as it emerged on the photographic surface and was mediated by the desires of Parisians who called for the bridge's construction.