

The Uses of History in Twentieth Century City Planning

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Throughout the twentieth century, city planners studied history. History and historicism have always played a central role in the ideology of the planning movement.

Many of the founders at the start of the century were art historians (Brinckmann, Gurlitt). Every one of the pioneering textbooks of modern planning technique proceeded from analysis of the historical form and precedents (Sitte, Burnham, Hegemann, Unwin). The city planning movement stimulated and celebrated local historiography (Geddes, Poete).

This intimate nexus between historical sensibility and city planning would be re-established in the later 20C by the neorationalists (Rossi), the neotraditionalists (Duany), morphologists (Vernez Moudon) and critical reconstructionists (Kleihues).

Yet a different mode of historical exposition continued throughout the mid 20C climax of modernist city planning. How might we connect Lewis Mumford's monumental urban history *The Culture of Cities* (1938) to his more anti-urban activity in the Regional Planning Association in the 1930s? How do we reconcile E A Gutkind's advocacy of urban destruction in *The Twilight of Cities* (1962) with his painstaking celebration of the urban past in the 4,000 page *International History of City Development* (1964-72)? How do we understand the reading of Pierre Lavedan's *Histoire de l'urbanisme* (1926-52) for the postwar generation of urbanists who planned the *grands ensembles*? Of what use were the historical narratives of Sigfried Giedion, Ernst Egli, Paul Zucker or Gordon Cherry in their time?

Planning historians do not seem to have addressed the curious dialectic between urbanism and the history of urban design. We suppose that the use of historical experiences is shaped not so much by the knowledge about history (which has always been strong during the century, especially in the modernist epoch) but more by the underlying ideology about history (which differed strongly between concepts of continuity, evolution and break). Our paper, as a preliminary essay, seeks to sketch a general history of the uses of history by twentieth century town planners. And it finally brings up the question what use of history might be considered appropriate in our times – not a peripheral task for a planning history society...

Introduction

In October 2002. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk invited a group of American and European historians to the Wolfsonian Institute at Miami Beach, Florida, for a two day seminar on that vital figure in the early twentieth century interchange of planning ideas between Europe and the USA, Werner Hegemann. We participated alongside a group of American housebuilders attending under the auspices of the Knight Program in Community Building. This was a typical Duany scenario, a live encounter between planning history and planning practice - the sceptical scholarship of Donatella Calabi, Christianne Case Collins, Jean-Louis Cohen, and Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani in creative tension with the can-do optimism of a gang of all-American, blazer-clad, cigar-chomping realtors.

Watching this encounter with its moments of misunderstanding as well as of mutual learning, we began to think about its wider significance for planning history. What motivates promoters and designers to study historical precedents ? Is the backward view necessarily conservative ? What roles has it played in 20C planning's love-hate relationship with the existing city ? Our paper offers a preliminary exploration of the uses of history in twentieth century city planning. For simplicity we split the period into three episodes. First we take the New Urbanism and similar manifestations of late 20C postmodern urbanism; then the mainstream traditional urbanism of the early 20C exemplified by Werner Hegemann and his contemporaries; then the mid-20C climax of modernist planning.

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The stylistic neo-traditionalism of American New Urbanism is an extreme example of a general tendency. The most characteristic attribute of postmodern urbanism has been its reflective re-introduction of the past into planning discourse (Ellin 1996). Aldo Rossi (1966) and Colin Rowe (1978) taught the late-20C generation of urbanists to consider the collective memory embodied in the received physical form of a city. A memory-concept underlay the *critical reconstruction* concept developed by Josef Paul Kleihues's from IBA-Berlin onwards (Kleihues 1986, 1987), the concepts of *Responsive Environments* developed by the Oxford School and British urbanists, and all the variants of North American urban design theory, particularly the Cornell school.

The historic turn involves both a specific engagement with local distinctiveness and general interest in historical types and models. Exploration of the particular historical personality of towns could, at its strongest, imply a meticulous typo-morphological analysis of older building stock (Muratori 1959) or Conzenian investigation of local plan-form. But more routinely it means that the point of departure for almost every contemporary town plan is some form of analysis of local characterisation and distinctiveness, and a figure-ground mapping, however notional, of the evolution of street and block patterns (Moudon 1997).

Generic types of street and block pattern have been brought back into view through work such as Rob Krier's *Urban Space* (1975), the Versailles school's studies of *Urban Forms* (Panerai 1997), or Allan Jacobs's meticulously researched typologies of urban thoroughfares (1993, 2002). The neotraditional Congress for New Urbanism makes extensive use of planning history as a resource for practitioners (Hebbert 2003). *New Civic Art - Elements of Town Planning* by Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Robert Alminana is the culmination of a project to distill a systematic theory of urbanism from past types. Title and organisation pay deliberate homage to

Hegemann and Peets' *American Vitruvius: An Architect's Handbook of Civic Art* (1922). In terms of its contents the *New Civic Art* is anything but new - it draws from all historical periods and sources, including Hegemann's book and modernist planning projects. It epitomises the postmodern concept of urban design as a continuum, an unbroken history of invention that mirrors the physical continuities of urban space.

The post-modern encounter between urban design and urban history has been a two-way process. Greater historical awareness amongst planners has paralleled increasing awareness of physical form amongst urban historians and cultural geographers: it is odd to recall Sir John Summerson's complaint in *The Historian and the City* that the planning history of city-as-artifact-as-form 'slips through the net almost every time' (Handlin & Burchard 1963 171). Urban space has become an undeniable element in any discussion of the city, as well a metaphorical meeting ground between the urban designer and all manner of cultural protagonists (Fyfe 1998).

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The origins of the 20C planning coincided with a similar surge of interest in urban space, and vigorous debate about its history and its significance for modernity. Several of the founding texts were written by art historians - for example Sitte (1889), Brinckmann (1920) and Gurlitt (1920). The international networks of town planning were closely tied in to those of the municipalist movement and the campaign of an educated urban bourgeoisie for local museums, libraries and other institutions of collective memory. This was the milieu of Marcel Poëte and Leon Jaussely in Paris (Calabi 1996), of Alfred Lichtwark and Fritz Schumacher in Hamburg (Jenkins 2002), of Charles Buls in Brussels (Smets 1995). Through his exhibitions and writings as much as through his urban schemes, Patrick Geddes communicated the possibility of projecting a city's future through intensive - indeed quasi-religious - reflection upon its past (Geddes 1915, Welter 2002). "A city is more than a place in space", he wrote, "it is a drama in time", proceeding in phases that he likened to "the layers of a coral reef in which each generation constructs its characteristic stony skeleton as a contribution to the growing yet dying and wearying whole" (Meller ed 1979 79, 82). Raymond Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice* underlined the practitioner's duties toward context while also marking out a larger historical project for the new profession of town planning : the need to systematic research into precedents, building up to a "complete history of town development and town planning, with a classification of the different types of plan which have been evolved in the course of natural growth or have been designed at different periods by human art" (1911 104). Not long afterwards the encyclopaedic *Civic Art* of Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets attempted just such a classification.

Architect-planners, of course, had a professional bias towards the study of the styles, but the obligation to history appeared just as strong for those who came to the planning movement from engineering, housing or public health reform. Henry Aldridge's *Case for Town Planning - a practical manual for the use of councillors, officers and others engaged in the preparation of town planning schemes* (1915) was as hard-headed a text as its name implied, but a quarter of it was spent on the histories of town planning in ancient and modern civilisations. Contrasting the high achievements of Classical and Renaissance urbanism with its 'chaotic neglect' in Victorian Britain, Aldridge urged municipal councillors and officers to take heed of the lessons of history, and "place town planning care and foresight amongst the chief municipal virtues to be practised by them". "So far from Town Planning being a 'modern fad', it

is one of the oldest of the arts evolved in the slow development of organised civic life in civilised countries" (1915 9). For Aldridge as for other pioneers of town planning, the argument had to be framed in an appeal to history.

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So far we have touched the extremities of the 20C and found the scent of Clio in pre- as well as post-modern planning. But what of the mid-century climax of modernism, a moment which - by definition - eclipsed concern for continuity with the old ? Modernism in planning drew on new wells for inspiration. It appealed to an aesthetic of green landscape and sunlight, a functional ethic of fitness-for-purpose for a mobile technology-based society, and - even more than in architecture - to the democratic and egalitarian idealism of a universal welfare state. Planning theory was framed in terms of substituting good for bad. It discouraged any accomodation with existing fabric. The standard textbook on postwar Britain - Lewis Keeble's *Principles and Practice of Town Planning* - warned against misguided half-measures. Piecemeal (rather than clean-sweep) redevelopment in the hope of preserving existing 'community' would be at the expense of a stable and lasting pattern for future generations (Keeble 1969 236). The central argument of Sigfried Giedion's *Space Time and Architecture* (1941) concerns the necessity of whole-scale urban surgery. "The use of a new and larger scale in town planning which would coincide with the scale already being used in the parkway system is an imperative necessity for the salvation of the city. This scale must permeate all urban projects. It is closely connected with the space-time conception of our period" (1941 569).

In schools of architecture the modernist shift often involved a sudden and revolutionary cut in traditional courses dedicated to styles and historic buildings. Notoriously, the arrival of Walter Gropius at Harvard purged the school of historical teaching and of the plaster-casts that had provided the focus for generations of architectural students. Gropius regarded historical study as a possibly useful extra for postgraduates but not a primary formative element (Wright and Parks 1990). The same philosophy was traumatically applied when Sir Albert Richardson and Hector Corfiato were succeeded by Richard Llewellyn-Davies at the Bartlett School in University College London.

In the world of town planning, by contrast, the shift to full-scale modernism was accompanied by ever more ambitious historiographic efforts: Pierre Lavedan's *Histoire de l'urbanisme* (1926-52), Lewis Mumford's sequence of studies of the history of the city and technology, beginning with *The Culture of Cities* (1938), and - after WW2 - Erwin Gutkind's *International History of City Development* (1964-72), Ernst Egli's *Geschichte des Städtebaus* (1959-67). In the background loomed the mountainous narratives of Oswald Spengler (1918-22) and Arnold Toynbee (1934-61).

Spengler wrote under the influence of *fin-de-siècle* nostalgia for a lost pre-industrial arcadia (Schorske 1963). Planners shared some of that pedigree. Besides, *Decline of the West's* dark epic of city and hinterland resonated with their more prosaic concerns about the management of industrial decentralisation, motorised commuting and residential densities. Lewis Mumford's *Culture of Cities* (1938) succeeded in harnessing Spenglerian pessimism to make the positive case for the garden-city ideals of the Regional Planning Association. Perhaps this was more historicism than history, in Karl Popper's terms, but it was one of the most widely-read statements of the case for planning. As Sidney Checkland puts it, "if we follow the story with Mumford we have a sense of ghastly, relentlessly cumulative error leading to social

corruption and impotence. Moreover we are provided with many ideas that historians might well mistrust as historical abstractions, the product not of observation and analysis but of a sense of the dramatic" (Dyos 1968 346). The appeal of the historical argument for Mumford was its leverage on present-day America. While Erwin Gutkind's dramatic purpose was less overt, the 4,000 pages of a global history of urbanism led inexorably to his advocacy of the modernist project in *Twilight of Cities* (1962). Pierre Lavedan's *Histoire de l'urbanisme* (1926-52) was the formative reading for the postwar generation of urbanists who planned the *grands ensembles*.

The logic was simple. An argument of cumulative long-run failure provided the strongest case for liberating people, traffic, greenspace and buildings from the confines of the traditional street. The seminal *Space Time and Architecture - the growth of a new tradition* by the art historian Sigfried Giedion opens with a philosophy of history : "History is not simply the repository of unchanging facts, but a process, a pattern of living and changing attitudes and interpretations. As such it is deeply a part of our own natures. To turn backward to a past age is not just to inspect it, to find a pattern which will be the same for all comers. The backward look transforms its object" (1941 5-7). Giedion tells urban history in terms of struggle and reconciliation. The Enlightenment separated technology from human feeling - a universalist conception of city planning has brought them back together. Haussmann in Paris and Berlage in Amsterdam were tentative pioneers and Cornelius Van Eesteren and Le Corbusier are true exponents of a 20C town planning that abolishes conventional street-geometry. Comprehensive large-scale town planning unites space with time, technology with human existence. "The reconquest of the unity of human life is nowhere more urgent than in his [the town planner's] work" (1941 540).

Most statements of the modernist theory of town planning had a similar historical (or historicist) logic. To take just two examples, Eliel Saarinen's *The City - Its Growth - Its Decay - Its Future* (1943) spelt out its hypothesis in the title. Part One of the book - 'The Past' - described the organic growth of cities since the dawn of civilisation and their 20C affliction by 'urban disease'. Part Two - 'Toward the Future' - prescribed the remedy, comprehensive cleansing and reorganisation of cities around modern principles of traffic organisation. Arthur Korn's *History Builds the Town* (1953) followed the same structure. "To master the problems of contemporary town planning' he explained "it is necessary to understand first what the town is. Therefore the forces which govern its life - its birth, growth and decline - and determine its structure will be examined first. These general laws of growth and structure will then be applied to the formulation of what our contemporary metropolis should be" (1953 1). Korn had been the communist spokesman for the 'proletarian' tendency in CIAM IV, and was the driving force behind the radical MARS plan for London (Gold 1997). Disappointed by what he felt to be the tame and compromising reconstruction of postwar London, his statement of the 'correct theory' of town planning was a particularly ruthless variant of modernist doctrine. Even Arthur Korn's Stalinist vision of eradication could, it seems, be offered as 'history building the town'.

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Architects can cheerfully cut free of the past and design an object-building with all the creative freedom of a sculptor or musician. Town planning is different. It has to work with the givens of history, geography, politics and human reality. The shock when Rem Koolhaas or Will Alsopp treat plan as if it were project, unconstrained by context or memory, only underlines the intrinsic difference between urbanist and architectural discourse. Planning theory has always acknowledged the sticky diachronic character of its subject-matter. It is impossible to

conceptualise the activity of town planning without reference to the accumulation of actions and meanings already embodied in the settlement pattern and building form. History builds the town whether - like Arthur Korn or Erwin Gutkind - you are arguing for clearance or - like Andres Duany or Josef Paul Kleihues - for reconstruction. The difference between modern and postmodern urbanisms is not in their reference to historical data but in the way they conceptualise it into a larger narrative. Modernism used urban history propaedeutically, a rehearsal of previous approaches demonstrating the necessity for a new basis of action. Postmodernism seeks to revive broken traditions or - in its classicist variant - reaffirms unbroken and eternal laws (Sonne 1999). Over and above these differences runs a common metanarrative of city as object, planning as praxis and planner (in some sense) as actor. History lends credibility to the implausible but vital task of shaping human settlement. Legitimation, the overt objective of Henry Aldridge's *Case for Town Planning*, was an implicit concern in the work of Gordon Cherry (1972) and it continues to lend momentum to the International Planning History Society. Those developers who attended the Miami Beach symposium in 2002 were not only learning about Hegemann, and axial composition, and the value of a shared public realm, but also about the spirit and purpose of planning.

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