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Urban History for Planners

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Urban History for Planners

Planning history and urban history are two different things.

There's plenty of overlap, of course, in scholarly topics and scholarly practitioners, but the two fields have developed distinct institutional structures and identities. There is a Journal of Planning History and a Journal of Urban History, the one edited from a Department of Urban Planning and the other from a Department of History. The Society for City and Regional Planning History took its initial energy and direction from planning professor Larry Gerckens. The Urban History Association took its initial impetus and guidance from history professors Kenneth Jackson and Michael Ebner. SACRPH holds biennial conferences in odd-numbered years, the UHA in even-numbered years. Each organization has given a "best book" award since the beginning of the 1990s, but only once to the same book (Robert Fogelson, Downtown: Its Rise and Fall).

The next few pages sketch the outlines of urban history and indicate the ways that it links with planning theory and practice. The conclusions and comments, I hope, will be useful in directing planning practitioners and planning scholars to the most useful connections for their own work.

Characterizing the Fields

Let's start with two metaphors that may help us think about these two fields. In a word,

planning history is a river. Urban history is a fragmented metropolis.

The field of planning has developed through time in the same way that a river moves through a landscape. Small streams from different sources and directions (landscape architecture, civil engineering, housing reform) gathered in the nineteenth century and flowed together to form the planning profession in the twentieth century. Like a river flowing through its valley, planning gathered force over the course of the twentieth century while developing a distinct professional identity. In recent decades, however, it has developed some of the characteristics of a braided stream, with ideas and movements flowing in and out of the main channel, sometimes draining energy away and sometimes revigorating the professional core.¹

Urban history has a different look. There once was an established and recognized center (represented by some of the classic books of the late 1950s and 1960s). A few years ago, I asked members of the Urban History Association and individual subscribers to the Journal of Urban History to name the scholarly studies that most influenced their own work. The resulting list of “greatest hits of urban history” includes eight books published between 1959 and 1968, plus one outlier from 1985 (Table 1). Although they appeared during the “urban crisis” years of the 1960s, they were largely conceived in the 1950s as responses to intellectual puzzles. Richard Wade wanted to argue with Frederick Jackson Turner and Stephen Thernstrom to test the social theory of W. Lloyd Warner. Asa Briggs wanted to rescue British local history from the antiquarians. These are the books that articulated core questions for urban historians and have structured teaching and textbooks in the ensuing decades. They thus constituted a sort of CSD (or Central Scholarship District) for the field.

As is the case the most American cities, however, “downtown” has lost much of its pull.

The CSD of urban history holds less attraction than several flourishing subfields that pull scholarly activity off in different directions. To borrow the terminology of geographer James Vance (1964), urban history is carried on within distinct scholarly “realms” that have some common origins and connections but have been developing relatively independently of each other. In Vance’s description of greater San Francisco, the City, the East Bay, and Santa Clara County provide largely self-contained urban environments. The model works as well for New York (Long Island and New Jersey revolve around the regional core but have little need for each other) and Chicago (where north and south sides come complete with their own baseball teams).

To demonstrate that I remember some of the Latin that Mrs. Wright taught me some decades ago at Fairview High School, I call the three realms of urban history *civitas*, *societas*, and *urbs*. The first is the domain of metropolitan growth and civic life. The second is the sphere of social patterns and human relations. The third is the arena of physical development and differentiation. Each contains some edge cities (strongly influential works), some boomburbs (hot topics), and a low-rise landscape of specialized studies. I want to explore each of the realms in turn, with an eye to the ways in which they connect to other disciplines, to urban theory, and to planning practice.

Civitas: The History of Civic Life

Urban history in the United States originated as an effort to legitimate new communities

and capture the excitement of headlong city growth. There is a direct line of succession from mid-19th century booster histories to some very sophisticated current scholarship. The first U.S. city histories, sometimes produced within a generation of the city's first settlement, were the work of journalists and promoters who narrated economic and governmental changes and supported their story with voluminous statistics on population, commerce, manufacturing, churches, schools, charities, and anything else that showed a growth in numbers. Their successors as civic historians were the authors and compilers of multi-volume "bookend histories" that appeared for nearly every major city between 1875 and 1925. If the first generation of urban history provided tools for the civic leadership, this second wave erected monuments to the same elites. The volumes reviewed the pioneer years, described public improvements, and noted citywide social and cultural institutions. One common interpretive theme was "progress in the world at large," a second was "the growth of public spirit," and the third was "the disproportionate influence of the city in regional and national expansion" (Chudacoff 1987, Wade 1970). Around 1930, a new group of academically trained and inclined historians took over from the amateurs. They wrote "urban biographies," often in multiple volumes, with the goal of showing how urban communities coalesced as complex entities from multiple parts. Best known are studies of Milwaukee by Bayrd Still, Rochester by Blake McKelvey, Chicago by Bessie Louise Pierce, and Washington by Constance McLaughlin Green.

This in the context in which Richard Wade in the U.S. and Asa Briggs in Britain put their own stamp on urban history by reaffirming the primacy of questions about the domain of public action. These are the concerns that Wade placed at the center the urban history agenda in several essays that emphasized two broad issues: (1) the internal process of institution building,

particularly those governmental and nonprofit institutions that claim to speak for, represent, or serve all residents, and (2) the external economic and political relations of cities, including the interaction between city-building and nation-building and the ways that communities present themselves to the world (Wade 1968, Wade1970).

Within this broad realm are several currently vital research clusters (Table 2). One is the continued interest in cities as engines of economic change and agents of modernization (that package of other "ations" including commodification, rationalization, bureaucratization, specialization, and nationalization). Why did a city grow in this particular place? How did it outdo competitors? Why did it stop growing? What were the economic strategies and strategic investments? techniques of promotion? relations between city and hinterland? This interest can include stories of city-regional growth and stories of relative or absolute economic decline. How did Seattle outpace Everett, Tacoma, and Portland? Why does Trenton no longer make what the world once took.

A second cluster of historians analyze cities as "political" entities that residents define, control, and direct through electoral politics, government, extra-governmental institutions, and the articulation of community identity. "How," they ask, "have the disparate residents of the United States managed to overcome kaleidoscopically shifting social patterns to construct and maintain a civil society?"

In contemporary debates, these are the sorts of issues addressed in semi-popular books such as David Rusk's Inside Game/Outside Game, Myron Orfield's Metropolitics, and Anthony Downs's New Visions for Metropolitan America, which all argue that there are ways to reinvigorate metropolitan areas as ethical communities by making the social and political

collectivity congruent with functional economic units. Mike Davis took the negative side in the same debate with his fiercely argued City of Quartz, while Fred Siegel tried to counter Davis's left wing pessimism with right wing pessimism of his own in The Future Once Happened Here. Books about the economic prospects of cities also fall into the same world of popular discussion—from Jane Jacobs's Cities and the Wealth of Nations to Richard Florida's Rise of the Creative Class. Theoretical approaches and cognate disciplines for this approach are summarized in Table 3 and 4.

In broad strokes, these are also many of the questions that planners and planning try to deal with (Table 5). Programs at meetings of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning are packed with sessions and papers on urban and regional economic development, globalization, metropolitan governance, and urban politics. Historical work on such topics links urban history at its margins not only to planning but also to economic history, policy history, and the study of politics.

Societas: Groups and Peoples in Urban Growth

The second realm of urban history deals with cities as arenas for the definition and defense of group identity. The relevance to planning comes in the broad area of community development. Planners try to assist neighborhoods and groups to identify their needs and strengths and to develop strategies for improving life chances. These efforts are surely enhanced if planners understand the evolution and past experiences of such groups.

Here we find urban history emerging from urban sociology—especially the theoretical and

empirical work associated with the University of Chicago between 1900 and 1940. For our purposes, the Chicago sociologists posed two great questions. They wanted to know how newcomers from Europe or from rural America adjusted to life in the American industrial city. They also wanted to know how people of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and economic status sorted themselves within growing cities. Within this framework, some historians have followed the Chicago School in examining the ways in which urban environments have challenged traditional values through the cultural confrontations of heterogeneity and the power of the economic market. Slavery eroded in the urban context. Sexuality has been explored and reconfigured. Women's roles have altered, expanded, and articulated with the marketplace (Table 3).

Other historians have been interested in subcultural formation and the way in which the size and heterogeneity of cities has allowed the proliferation of group identities. Here we find a multitude of books about specific groups in specific cities (Germans in Milwaukee, Irish in Boston, Italians in Chicago, women in San Antonio or Boston, gays in New York). We also find studies of defended neighborhoods, black self-determination, the construction of ethnic identity, or the development of working class consciousness. Urban social history thus links fruitfully to the history of women, ethnic groups, immigrants and immigration, blacks, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans. It can form a seamless whole with social and ethnography studies of urban life—closing the circle with the neighborhood studies of earlier sociologists. It is also open to the “text-reading” approaches of cultural studies with its goal of discovering multiple expressions of community values (Table 4).

This, as well, is the world of the urban novelist. There have been occasional memorable

novels about the public city (Henry Adams with Democracy, Edwin O'Connor with The Last Hurrah). More common are urban novels about group identities and individual adjustment to heterogeneity—The Adventures of Augie March and The Jungle, Native Son and the Studs Lonigan trilogy, The Bonfire of the Vanities and Invisible Man, A Hazard of New Fortunes and Rabbit is Rich.²

As these titles suggest, the history of urban society is the context for the practical work of community planning. Community members have longer memories than most city planning departments, and anyone interested in grassroots planning needs to know the stories that a neighborhood or group tells about itself. Histories of urban community change can offer starting points and questions that planners and residents can use for shaping desired futures.

Urbs: Places and Place-Making

The third realm of urban history is the study of cities as physical places. Our metropolitan areas are landscapes and cityscapes, natural settings and built environments, systems for physical interaction and containers of activities. Here, of course, we are squarely in the territory of planning and design (Table 5).

This strand of scholarship takes its origin in the evolving self-consciousness of the design professions. Maturing professions of architecture, landscape architecture, and planning have wanted to understand the work of the disciplinary founders and shapers—the Burnhams and Olmsteds and Nolens. At one level this has been a natural impulse to create patron saints. More importantly, it has been motivated by the desire to understand the evolution of the big ideas that

drive self-conscious efforts to create and manipulate social forms.

We have, therefore, abundant work on the history of communities planned with deliberate social goals and the ways in which key ideas have been developed, transmitted, and elaborated. Here are the stories of Radiant Cities, Garden Cities, and Broadacre Cities, model towns and ritzy suburbs, Port Sunlight, Pullman, Palos Verdes, Panorama City, Park Forest. Here also is the story of government interventions through zoning, urban renewal, public housing, and similar programs.

Framing this history of self-conscious planning is a larger story of the interaction of social, cultural, and economic factors in the shaping of the built environment. Historians of these processes have learned much from urban geography and from studies of popular culture and folk culture (Table 3). Many historians, for example, want to know about vernacular cityscapes as well as special places. Taking off from the vastly fertile imagination of landscape historian J. B. Jackson, more and more historical scholarship is examining the ways in which cities and neighborhoods are shaped by group preferences and mass culture at all class levels—learning not only from Las Vegas but also from Lubbock, as Jackson once suggested. Other historians look at cityscapes—including neighborhood differentiation and spatial patterning by class and race—as the products of the housing and real estate markets. They study how the power of the market has constrained individual homebuilders and home buyers, small subdividers, and large-scale community builders who have tried to meet housing demand with the massproduction of neighborhoods.

Beyond the academy, this realm of "urbs" is the intellectual territory where Jane Jacobs praised the sidewalks of New York, Robert Caro detailed the deeds and misdeeds of Robert

Moses, Joel Garreau penned his encomium to Edge City, and James Kunstler lashed out at the Geography of Nowhere. It is also where the New Urbanists are once again arguing that social function follows urban form in the design of communities. If you look at this popular writing, by the way, this is perhaps the area where our urban history most often is poorly understood. Garreau ignored history entirely, Jacobs and Kunstler simply got it wrong.

The study of the built environment leads naturally into the history of public policy on housing, environment, and transportation . . . and into histories of the complex interactions between technological change, economic development, and the natural settings of cities. Urban environmental history has been a flourishing subfield in the last decades as scholars have examined the ways in which urban growth has modified its natural settings and public policies have tried (and often failed) to direct this environmental change. Examples range from Mike Davis's rambunctious Ecology of Fear to careful studies of anti-pollution policy and waterway modification in Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and other cities. An example of such urban environmental history informing planning in Cleveland was recently described by Wendy Kellogg (2002).

Intellectual Margins and Scholarly Frontiers

For teachers and practitioners of urban and regional planning, the realm of the built city is obviously central. But there is also great interest in the overlap of the physical city with the political city and social city. We can ask, for example, how different public policies have shaped land decisions and how different groups have used and shaped urban spaces.

Borrowing from Scott Campbell's article "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities," in which he diagramed the major concerns of planning to show their overlaps and tensions (Campbell 1996), I've used Figure 1 to show how the realms of urban history interact, creating conceptual tensions that can be managed and negotiated in the real world but never resolved.

The overlap of *civitas* and *societas* creates the "Civic Tension." In a city of multiple groups and interests, is it possible to define and defend a unifying public interest? Who gets to speak for the "public" and how do groups mobilize to affect or influence civic institutions? Reader's might look at Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interest: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* and Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* to see how African Americans have not only adapted to external circumstances but also developed strategies to modify these circumstances and to shape citywide policies. They might look at the work of Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* to see white workers in Chicago pursuing similar strategies. Planning theorists who have been exploring the possibilities of planning as communicative action are attacking this same question.

The overlap of *societas* and *urbs* creates the "Pluralistic Tension." When multiple groups within cities have claims on the same spaces, how do they negotiate their use? What meanings have different groups given to designed and vernacular spaces? For example, Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar have examined the very different needs which New York's elite and its workers wanted to satisfy through Central Park in *The Park and the People*. Mary Ryan has described the variety of ways in which Americans used city streets and other public places in *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century*,

while Dolores Hayden's "power of place" experiments have pointed out avenues for exploring the multiple meanings of the cityscape. Theoretically oriented planners will recognize this tension as a central concern of writers such as Leonie Sandercock who call for planning that embraces diversity.

Finally, the overlap of *urbs* and *civitas* creates the "Planning Tension." How can broad civic goals be spatially realized in a city that is fragmented politically, socially, and economically? How have efforts to shape local communities interacted with the need and claims of the more inclusive metropolitan community? Howard Gillette, Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C. and Arnold Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto have shown how broad schemes of urban planning have had very different impacts on groups with unequal access to power. Becky Nicolaides, My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working Class Suburbs of Los Angeles and Thomas Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit have looked at working class communities whose self-determination has ultimately undermined the larger community. In contrast, Sam Warner has looked for historically rooted commonalities in Greater Boston and I've done the same for Greater Portland. For planning theory, this tension manifests in efforts to reconcile the needs of a sustainable commons with the requirements and demands of property.

Conclusions

As is the case with all lively fields of scholarship, urban history is growing on its margins

where "urban" topics are shared with cognate disciplines and historical fields. Like an economically diversified metropolis—to return to my opening metaphor—urban history is in a position to develop new hinterlands and connections through interactive lines of inquiry.

Permeable edges and overlapping conversations cannot help but be beneficial. I agree with John Stuart Mill, who wrote in the last century that "it is hardly possible to overrate the value, in the present low state of human development, of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar. Such communication has always been one of the primary sources of progress." Mill was not thinking about American academics or interdisciplinary graduate programs, but I think that they fit his description.

For the history of cities as it relates to the concerns of urban design and planning, I've been suggesting that some of the greatest scholarly "progress" will come from such interaction on the edges, from studies of the ways in which broad public policies and goals have shaped urban form, from studies of the tensions between economic growth and community welfare, from studies of the contested use and meaning of spaces and places.

If we were to translate these same questions into current policy debates, we'd be talking about the costs and benefits of growth management, the possibilities of "green" planning, the challenges of community-based development, the spatial needs of women and people of color, or the possibilities of designing vibrant and inclusive neighborhoods and downtowns.

I entered urban history as a graduate student thirty-two years ago because I thought that history could help us better understand the public and its problems. I still do. To know what policies have worked and which have failed, to understand the reasons behind the planning

choices inscribed on our metropolitan regions, to know how city people have defined and defended their identities—to know the history of our values, institutions, and built environment—is to be more thoughtful and effective planners.

Table 1: Most Influential Books in Urban History

Richard Wade, The Urban Frontier (1959)

Lewis Mumford, The City in History (1961)

H. J. Dyos, Victorian Suburb (1961)

Sam B. Warner, Jr., Streetcar Suburbs (1962)

Asa Briggs, Victorian Cities (1963)

Stephen Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress (1964)

Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (1966)

Sam B. Warner, Jr., The Private City (1968)

Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier (1985)

Table 2: Key Questions in Urban History

Cities as Civic Entities

How and why have North American cities grown?

How has urban growth structured the continental economy?

How have citizens organized to meet their common needs?

What institutions and practices have created a sense of commonality and civic responsibility?

Cities as Social Settings and Systems

How has urbanization impacted established institutions and cultural practices?

How have groups within cities defined, articulated, and defended their identities?

City Building and Neighborhood Building

How have changing technologies of production and consumption shaped uses of land?

What have been the short and long-term effects of these uses on natural systems and landscapes.

How have popular tastes and values shaped and differentiated cityscapes?

How has urbanization affected the natural environment?

Table 3: Theoretical Frameworks for Urban History

Cities as Civic Entities

Division of labor, specialization, bureaucratization

Political economy and growth machine models

Habermasian models of communicative action

Cities as Social Settings and Systems

Social theories of modernization

Heterogeneity, value change and subcultural formation

Locality and group as sites of resistance to hegemony

City Building and Neighborhood Building

Social and economic adjustment to technology

Land economics

Table 4: Cognate Fields for Urban History

Cities as Civic Entities

Law

Political and economic history

Political science, public policy and administration

Cities as Social Settings and Systems

Immigration, ethnic, and labor history

Sociology and anthropology

Cultural studies and popular culture

City Building and Neighborhood Building

History of technology and environment

Geography

Environmental studies,

Architecture and landscape architecture

Table 5: Links between Urban History and Planning Practice

Cities as Civic Entities

Economic development

Growth management

National urban policy

Citizen participation

Cities as Social Settings and Systems

Community development

Planning and communities of color

Gender dimensions of planning

City Building and Neighborhood Building

Urban design

Historic preservation

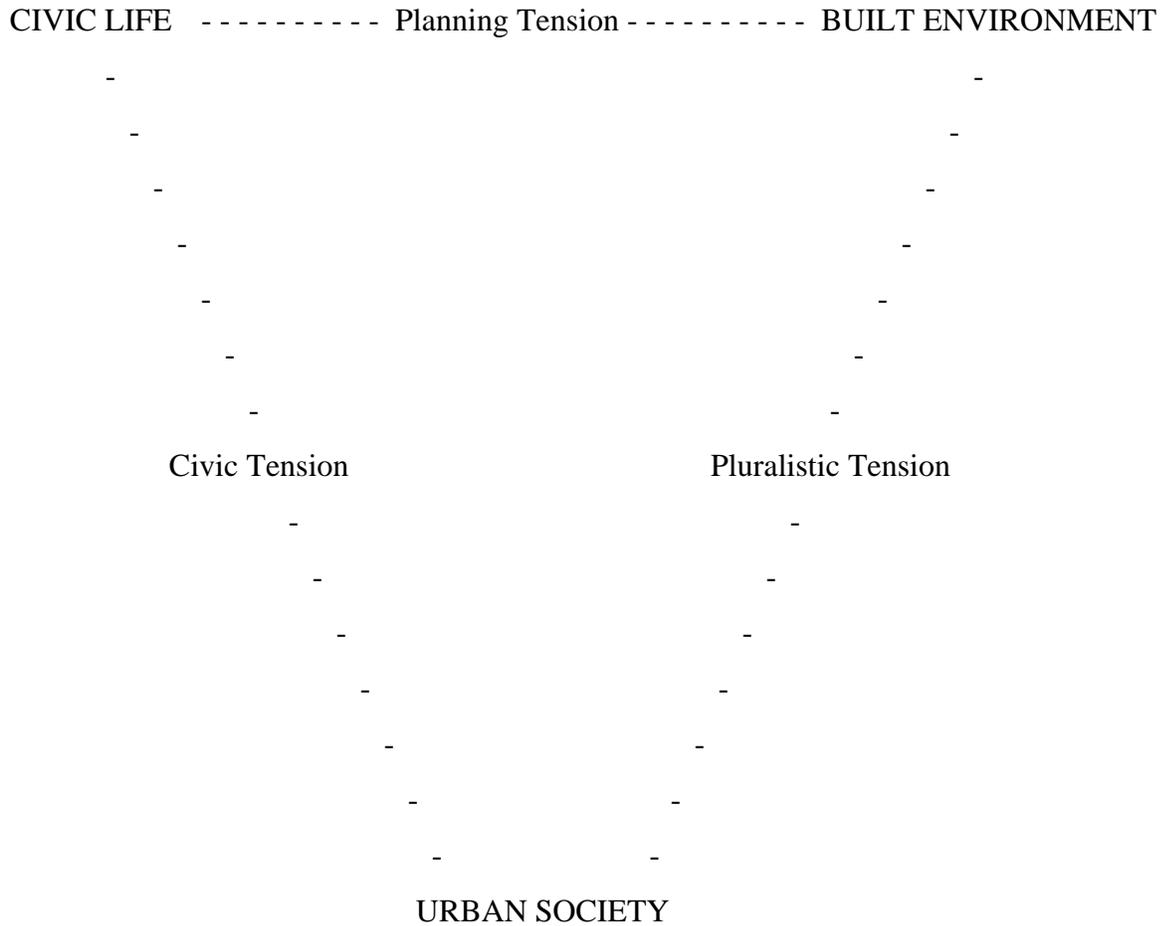
Housing planning

Transportation planning

Environmental planning

Land use planning and implementation

Figure 1: The Realms of Urban History



Notes

1. For a recent example of this mainstream history of the profession, see the section on “Planning Movements” that I prepared, in consultation with American Planning Association staff, for the volume Urban Design Standards to be published under the auspices of APA in 2005

2. Readers interested in pursuing the role of fiction for understanding urban history might look at "My Favorite Historical Novel," *American Heritage*, 43 (October 1992): 84-107. Most of the suggestions by writers and historians are full of cowboys and pioneers, but among the citations are Henry James, *The Bostonians*, Edith Wharton, *Old New York*, John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, Henry Adams, *Democracy*, Jack Finney, *Time and Again*, and John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*.

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