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The Birth of Urban Design History out of the Spirit of Multidisciplinarity

Wolfgang Sonne

- ¹ Urban design history, or more precisely: historiography, seems to emerge as a typical disciplinary product of art history. In 1920, art historian Albert Erich Brinckmann published the first general history of urban design with the title *The Art of Urban Design: Historic Sections and Contemporary Goals*. Given his definition, that “the program of artistic urban design is to bring building masses and spaces into a relationship and to develop them from each other,”¹ one might expect a purely formal approach to urban design history in Wölfflinian terms—especially as Brinckmann had been a pupil of Heinrich Wölfflin’s.

But the truth is more difficult. In this paper I will show, that Brinckmann’s concept was more complex and included both a relation to practice and different disciplines. Then I will show how urban design historiography did emerge within the practical discourse of urban design—not within a historic discipline like art history. And finally we will see how the following comprehensive urban design histories continued to be multidisciplinary—without losing the focus on urban forms.²

Urban Design History as Art History?

- ² Brinckmann’s *The Art of Urban Design* started with stating the multidisciplinary nature of its subject. In the first sentence he mentioned “the social and economic conditions of urban development” and promised to add now the “formal history of cities.”³ The analysis of every example was based on the conviction that urban form was not an autonomous element, but influenced by various factors. Dealing with contemporary urban design he said: “Housing, industry, trade and traffic all have their impact, the city itself as a whole has certain living habits and artistic traditions. The individual claims have to be balanced against each other.”⁴ In Brinckmann’s view, urban design

was influenced by society, economy, politics, technology, and other factors, but the form was not only a resulting product: it was a factor with equal rights.

Furthermore, Brinckmann did not aim at a purely academic inquiry, an aseptic historical interpretation. He aimed at influencing contemporary urban design practice, saying that his book was “written with the intention to inspire contemporary artistic thinking.”⁵ In fact, his book was itself inspired from “contemporary artistic thinking”: even if he was fighting Camillo Sitte’s ideas (which he misinterpreted as “romantic” and “medieval”), his major understanding of urban design was influenced by the architect Sitte. Brinckmann’s history of urban squares, *Square and Monument* (1908), directly picked up Sitte’s major topic of his seminal book on *Urban Design according to its Artistic Principles* (1889). Furthermore, what Brinckmann called the “feeling for space and spatial effects” in 1908 had been Sitte’s invention and major concern in 1889.⁶

Urban Design History as Part of Planning Literature

- 3 In fact, urban design history did not emerge within the discipline of art history, but within the broad and multidisciplinary urban design discourse. The first general urban design histories had been composed as chapters within planning reports and handbooks. An early example was Daniel Hudson Burnham and Edward Herbert Bennett’s *Plan of Chicago* (1909). Here the entire second chapter of 20 pages was devoted to “City Planning in Ancient and Modern Times” and displayed a well illustrated urban design history from Mesopotamia to the United States. The book itself had been composed by a multidisciplinary team: while Burnham and Bennett were trained as architects, Charles Moore who wrote the majority of the text was a politician and journalist. Furthermore, the authors mentioned the importance of several factors like religion, politics, and legislation, putting a strong emphasis on economy by declaring “commerce a leading motive in city building.”⁷

In 1909 as well, Rudolf Eberstadt’s *Handbook of Housing and the Housing Question* appeared. It started with a general urban design history of 50 pages, entitled “The Development of Urban Building: Antiquity, Medieval Times, Period of Princely Building, Present.”⁸ While Eberstadt was one of the leading economists in Germany, he nevertheless considered not only economics but also other disciplines as important for his topic: “The scientific disciplines which had been relevant are administration science, technology and economics.”⁹ He even did not neglect the role of form and art as a final goal: “Certainly, of greatest importance for our inquiries are economic, legal and political aspects; but the artistic tasks are totally identical with our aims and can only be realized at the same time and together with these aims.”¹⁰

Urban design exhibitions have been another medium of the planning discourse which displayed early examples of urban design history. The first part of the catalog of the large urban design exhibition in Berlin 1910, edited by Werner Hegemann, was dedicated to a historic review and a Berlin planning history. Hegemann, who had studied economics before becoming an urban planner, also emphasized the multidisciplinary nature of urban design, not neglecting the aesthetic aspects: “But the technical and economic improvements must not be separated in time from the artistic improvements, both must be struggled with at the same time.”¹¹ Also Patrick Geddes’s touring *Cities and Town Planning Exhibition*, which started in Chelsea in 1911 displayed a broad history of urban design. It was arranged in chronological manner to prove the

quasi biological evolution of urban design history which the biologist Geddes had envisaged.¹²

The most monumental and multidisciplinary project were the two volumes of Hendrik Christian Andersen and Ernest Hébrard's *World Centre of Communication* (1913–1918). The first volume started with a global history of monumental ensembles from Antiquity to the present by archaeologist and historian Gabriel Leroux with 130 pages ("The Great Monumental Conceptions of the Past"), including cities from Mesopotamia to Washington 1902. Then followed the presentation proper of the World Center, with a text by the artist Andersen and illustrations by the architect Hébrard.¹³ The second volume displayed an essay by philosopher of law Umano on the legal possibilities for international order and a study by economist Jeremiah W. Jenks on the economic advantages of a World Center of Communication.¹⁴ Thus five different aspects of urban design, including urban design history, have been examined by experts, which represented five different disciplines.

In all these cases, general histories of urban design had been incorporated into planning reports and books, written by experts with different scientific backgrounds, before finally Brinckmann introduced the topic into the discipline of art history.

Urban Design History as a Multidisciplinary Account

- 4 After Brinckmann's pioneering work in 1920, several volumes entirely dedicated to urban design history appeared. In 1926, philosopher and art historian Pierre Lavedan started publishing his *Histoire de l'urbanisme*.¹⁵ Even if he declared to be adding a new chapter to art history and carrying out an "étude des apparences matérielles,"¹⁶ he included geographical, social, economic, and political aspects into his analysis of the urban form.

Marcel Poëte presented a comprehensive approach in his *Introduction à l'urbanisme. L'évolution des villes* in 1929. According to his profession as librarian and historian he planned both a systematic and historic approach, but his urban design history did not transcend antiquity. He declared that urbanism was "à la fois science et art" and comprised "disciplines diverses : économique, géographique, historique et autres."¹⁷ All these different aspects were closely interconnected: "les traits économique servent à expliquer les traits sociaux, de même qu'à ces derniers sont liés les traits politiques ou administratifs."¹⁸ Thus for him, urban design history was a topic which necessarily required a multidisciplinary approach.

Architect and art historian Paul Zucker focused explicitly on urban form in his book *Evolution of the City Image: The City as Form* (1929). But this did not imply that he ignored other aspect. On the contrary, he underlined the importance of a multidisciplinary approach: "Every analysis of the city must start from two aspects: one is the aesthetic understanding of the city as a uniquely designed work of art which is positioned in space with its own inner logic; the other is the biological understanding which sees the city as a living and evolving organism which is positioned in time and is following social, sanitary, economic, and technological laws."¹⁹

An all-embracing definition was given by writer Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* (1938). He described the city as a focus of all kinds of human activities: "The city, as one finds it in history, is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus."²⁰ Accordingly he included a wide range of factors into his historical

account, but did not neglect the relevance of formal aspects: the backbone of his volume was the plates where he combined illustrations with extensive captions which analyzed the urban images.

Conclusion

- 5 The writing of urban design history never was a disciplinary project of art history, dealing only with formal aspects and ignoring all others. On the contrary: it started within the practitioner's discourse; it was written by scientists of different disciplines as architects, archaeologists, historians, economists, biologists, journalists, and finally also art historians; and it always considered a wider range of aspects as geography, climate, economy, society, politics, technology, hygiene, religion, philosophy, and the arts. But while dealing with these different aspects it never lost sight of its central task: to interpret and to understand the perceivable result of planning—the urban form. Maybe this is the most challenging point for urban design history in our times: not to echo the ubiquitous claims for interdisciplinarity as this interdisciplinarity had always been admitted and practiced anyway, but to refocus our writing on urban design. Not to look for salvation in other disciplines and to deny the relevance of forms, but to search for an appropriate use of other disciplines' methods and knowledge to accomplish our discipline's tasks at best: interpreting and understanding urban forms.
- Hendrik Christian Andersen, Edward Herbert Bennett, Albert Erich Brinckmann, Daniel Hudson Burnham, Rudolf Eberstadt, Patrick Geddes, Ernest Hébrard, Werner Hegemann, Pierre Lavedan, Gabriel Leroux, Charles Moore, Lewis Mumford, Marcel Poëte, Camillo Sitte, Heinrich Wölfflin, Paul Zucker
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NOTES DE FIN

1. "Baumasse und Räume in Beziehung zu setzen und aus einander zu entwickeln, das ist das Programm künstlerischen Stadtbaus." Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Stadtbaukunst. Geschichtliche Querschnitte und neuzeitliche Ziele*, Berlin, 1920, p. 134. Cf. also: Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Deutsche Stadtbaukunst in der Vergangenheit*, Frankfurt, 1911.
 2. Cf. Wolfgang SONNE, *Representing the State: Capital City Planning in the Early Twentieth Century*, Munich, London, New York, 2003; Wolfgang SONNE, "'The entire city shall be planned as a Work of Art.' Städtebau als Kunst im frühen modernen Urbanismus 1890 – 1920," in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2003, pp. 207–236; Michael HEBBERT and Wolfgang SONNE, "'History Builds the Town.' On the Uses of History in Twentieth Century City Planning," in Xavier MONCLUS and Manuel GUARDIA, eds., *Culture, Urbanism and Planning*, London, 2006, pp. 3–19; Wolfgang SONNE, "Die Geburt der Städtebaugeschichte aus dem Geist der Multidisziplinarität," in *Wolkenkuckucksheim – Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. Internationale Zeitschrift für Theorie und Wissenschaft der Architektur*, vol. 10, 2006, <http://www-1.tu-cottbus.de/BTU/Fak2/TheoArch/wolke/deu/Themen/052/Sonne/sonne.htm>.
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3. "die sozialen und ökonomischen Bedingungen der städtischen Entwicklung," "Formgeschichte der Städte," Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Stadtbaukunst. Geschichtliche Querschnitte und neuzeitliche Ziele*, Berlin, 1920, preface.
4. "Wohnungswesen, Industrie, Handel und Verkehr machen Ansprüche, die Stadt selbst als Ganzes hat bestimmte Lebensgewohnheiten und künstlerische Traditionen. Die einzelnen Forderungen müssen gegeneinander ausgewogen werden." Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Stadtbaukunst. Geschichtliche Querschnitte und neuzeitliche Ziele*, Berlin, 1920, p. 119.
5. "in der Absicht geschrieben, das gegenwärtige künstlerische Denken anzuregen." Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Stadtbaukunst. Geschichtliche Querschnitte und neuzeitliche Ziele*, Berlin, 1920, p. 107.
6. "Gefühl für Raum und Raumwirkung," Albert Erich BRINCKMANN, *Platz und Monument*, Berlin, 1908, 3rd ed. 1923, p. 190.
7. Daniel Hudson BURNHAM, Edward Herbert BENNETT, and Charles MOORE, *Plan of Chicago*, Chicago, 1909, p. 9.
8. "Die Entwicklung der städtischen Bauweise: Altertum, Mittelalter, Periode der landesfürstlichen Bautätigkeit, Gegenwart," Rudolf EBERSTADT, *Handbuch des Wohnungswesens und der Wohnungsfrage*, Jena, 1909.
9. "Die Zweige der Wissenschaft, die in Betracht kamen, sind Verwaltungslehre, Technik und Volkswirtschaft," Rudolf EBERSTADT, *Handbuch des Wohnungswesens und der Wohnungsfrage*, Jena, 1909, p. III.
10. "Gewiß stehen für unsere Untersuchungen die volkswirtschaftlichen, rechtlichen und politischen Gesichtspunkte an erster Stelle; indes die künstlerischen Forderungen fallen mit unseren Zielen vollständig zusammen und können nur gleichzeitig und gemeinsam mit diesen verwirklicht werden." Rudolf EBERSTADT, *Handbuch des Wohnungswesens und der Wohnungsfrage*, Jena, 1909, p. 172.
11. "Dabei darf jedoch die technische und wirtschaftliche Überwindung von der künstlerischen zeitlich nicht getrennt werden, um beide muss gleichzeitig gerungen werden," Werner HEGEMANN, *Der Städtebau nach den Ergebnissen der allgemeinen Städtebau-Ausstellung in Berlin nebst einem Anhang: Die internationale Städtebau-Ausstellung in Düsseldorf*, vol. 1, Berlin, 1911, p. 129. Christiane CRASEMANN COLLINS, *Werner Hegemann and the Search for Universal Urbanism*, New York, London, 2005.
12. Patrick GEDDES, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics*, London, 1915. Volker M. WELTER, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*, Cambridge, London, 2002.
13. Hendrik Christian ANDERSEN and Ernest M. HÉBRARD, *Creation of a World Centre of Communication*, Paris, 1913 (French edition: *Création d'un centre mondial de communication*, Paris, 1913).
14. Hendrik Christian ANDERSEN and Olivia CUSHING ANDERSEN, *Creation of a World Centre of Communication. Legal Argument, Economic Advantage*, Rome, 1918 (French edition: *Création d'un centre mondial de communication. Science positive du gouvernement, les avantages économique*, Rome, 1918).
15. Pierre LAVEDAN, *Histoire de l'urbanisme*, vol. 1: *Antiquité-Moyen Âge*, Paris, 1926, vol. 2: *Renaissance et temps moderne*, Paris, 1941, vol. 3: *Epoque contemporaine*, Paris 1952.
16. Pierre LAVEDAN, *Histoire de l'urbanisme. Antiquité-Moyen Âge*, Paris, 1926, p. 2.
17. Marcel POËTE, *Introduction à l'urbanisme. L'évolution des villes*, Paris, 1929, p. 1.
18. Marcel POËTE, *Introduction à l'urbanisme. L'évolution des villes*, Paris, 1929, p. 3.
19. "So wird jede Betrachtung des Stadtorganismus immer von einer zweifachen Sicht ausgehen müssen: einmal von der ästhetischen Auffassung der Stadt als des einmaligen gestalteten Kunstwerkes, das mit der nur ihm eigenen inneren Gesetzlichkeit im Raume steht, und daneben von der biologischen Anschauung, welche die Stadt als einen lebendigen, sich ständig fortentwickelnden Organismus ansieht, der, sozialen, hygienischen, ökonomischen und

technischen Gesetzen unterworfen, als solcher in der Zeit steht.” Paul ZUCKER, *Entwicklung des Stadtbildes. Die Stadt als Form*, Munich, Berlin, 1929, p. 11.

20. Lewis MUMFORD, *The Culture of Cities*, New York, 1938, p. 3.

RÉSUMÉS

Urban design history did not emerge as a strictly disciplinary project of art history. Even if the first general urban design history was published in 1920 by art historian Albert Erich Brinckmann, a disciple of Heinrich Wölfflin's, it took at least as much inspiration from architectural theories as Camillo Sitte's Städtebau (1889). Furthermore, the first general urban design histories had not been published as separate history books, but appeared as substantial chapters in planning literature as in Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago (1909) or Rudolf Eberstadt's Handbuch des Wohnungswesens und der Wohnungsfrage (1909). The analysis of further urban design histories not only reveals that the authors came from such different disciplines as architecture, history, art history, economics, or politics, but also dealt with a variety of disciplines and factors for interpreting the development of cities. Despite this broad multidisciplinary approach, these authors never lost their focus: to interpret the urban form.

INDEX

Index chronologique : XIXe siècle, XXe siècle, Epoque contemporaine

Index géographique : Europe, Allemagne, France, Berlin, Londres, Amérique, Paris, Angleterre, Etats-Unis, Chicago

Mots-clés : historiographie, interdisciplinarité, design urbain

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