

THE FIRST TOWN PLANNING CONFERENCE REVISITED (1910-2010)

FABIANO LEMES DE OLIVEIRA

Address: School of Architecture of the University of Portsmouth, Portland Building, Portland Street, PO3 3AH, Portsmouth, United Kingdom
e-mail: fabiano.lemes@port.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses the importance of the Town Planning Conference organised by the RIBA in London, in 1910, in the formation of urban planning as a modern discipline. This was one of the most important events in the origins of town planning and the bedrock upon which the discussions around it started to flourish. Attended by the most influential planners at that crucial moment, the debates held then forged the main directions in which the discipline developed thereafter. It provided a fundamental theoretical corpus that reached far distant corners of the world and influenced the way in which cities across the globe were planned. Therefore, this paper will look into how that event exposed the most fundamental views on how to plan a city at that moment, including the German *Städtebau* approach, the emerging British Town Planning, the American *City Beautiful* and the French *Urbanisme*. Finally, the paper will highlight the key points that were discussed then which are still pertinent to our problems today and are the origins of many contemporary ideas on urban planning and design.*

INTRODUCTION

A 100 years ago, in the facilities of the RIBA and of the Royal Academy in London took place the First Town Planning Conference (TPC). That was the most important event in the origins of the new discipline of town planning and the bedrock upon which the discussions around it started to flourish. Attended by the most influential planners at that crucial moment, the debates held then forged the main directions in which the discipline developed in the forthcoming years.

The publication of the transactions, in 1911, produced a fundamental theoretical corpus that reached far distant corners of the world and influenced the way in which cities across the globe were planned. This publication contains excellent texts and exposes the most fundamental contrasting views on how to plan a city at that moment, including the German *Städtebau* approach, the emerging British Town Planning, the American *City Beautiful* and the French *Urbanisme*. Nowadays, this publication is a relic, very difficult to get hold of and therefore its contents have not been fully uncovered and discussed yet. This paper aims, thus, at revisiting the importance the conference had at that time and point out aspects still in discussion after 100 years of its realisation. In order to do so, this work draws attention to the intricate relationship between fundamental individual actors, the main trends, and their significance to contemporary urban debates.

In a moment when urban design and town planning are more and more important and debated in our societies, the paper shares the problems, views and solutions discussed 100 years ago and the impact they had in our current understanding of city planning.

CONTEXT

As Sutcliffe (1981, p.3) stated, the rise of town planning in Britain was a direct response to the problems of rapid urban growth and change caused by industrialization. The process of consolidation of this new disciplinary field can be dated to the period between the last quarter of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, basically with the development of the garden city idea and Unwin's approach to designing garden suburbs (Ashworth, 1954).

The term "town planning" itself was coined in 1905, and represented a will to differentiate this new art and science from the acts and regulations from the previous period. Very soon, the newly called "planners" would put emphasis on the importance of design principles and the role they could play in the transformation of the urban environment. It is not strange then the fact that the First Town Planning Conference in London was organized by the RIBA, which illustrates the will of architects to take a more decisive role in the future of the planning of cities. It is only in 1914 that an independent profession of town planning would be created and the Town Planning Institute founded. Again, the importance of architects at this moment is also visible when one looks at the founding members of the TPI to detect that architects were the professional group with majority.

The conference happened a year after the passing of the first Town Planning Act in 1909, which made statutory town planning become a function of local governments. This paved the way for the creation of institutions, academic courses and events related to urban planning. Ernest George makes very explicit how the Conference was directly triggered by the act from 1909:

In view of the recent passing into law of the Housing and Town Planning Act 1909, it is of the utmost importance that the architectural development of towns should receive the most careful consideration. The Royal Institute of British Architects has therefore decided to organise a Conference to study the architectural problems involved in the improvement and extension of our cities. (RIBA, 1910a, p. 300)

The TPC marks a differentiation from the Public Health movement of the 19th Century and the "by-law" approach to urban reform towards a more comprehensive understanding of how to plan the city for the industrial era. Sutcliffe made clear how this first stage of the formative years of British Planning provided the framework upon which comprehensive plans could occur (Sutcliffe, 1981). This phase combined the Victorian need for creating housing with the inclusion of gardens as a means to help combating the miasmatic and gloomy conditions of the industrial towns, which culminated in experiences such as Port Sunlight and Bournville in the last quarter of the 19th Century. These examples served as models for the suburban expansion the country was experiencing, which alongside Howard's garden city and its Unwin's development into the

modern garden suburb, pointed towards more comprehensive approaches in planning the cities. It is exactly this historical development of town planning in Britain that they decided to show to international visitors, as they organized trips to Letchworth, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Port Sunlight, Bournville, Bedford Park, among others.

In those formative years of town planning, the possibility of exchanging ideas within newly created institutions, through the publication of books, field trips, and the creation of a network of conferences helped enormously the definition of a corpus of knowledge that underpinned the development of the profession. The experiences held in different countries were soon shared amongst international peers, which informed the debates on the best ways to plan the modern city. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning that the *Städtebau Ausstellung*, held in Berlin in June 1910, had been the most important forum in the area so far. The exhibition was attended by over 65.000 people and was overwhelmingly exposing German plans, including the competition for the Great Berlin. Unwin's account of this exhibition is a clear example of the interchange of ideas and practices at these early stages of the planning profession. The British architect described the Berlin *Städtebau Ausstellung* as "very comprehensive", and observed how the British tradition of the cottage dwelling and of the garden villages was being adopted. On the other hand, Unwin was fascinated by Eberstadt solution of Green Wedges, as a possible way of increasing the presence of greenery in the large cities (Unwin, 1910, p. 17).

The scope and quality of the German plans, allied with the vast number of cases, turned that country into the main reference for the development of town planning in Britain at that moment. The organization of the RIBA TPC was a subsequent step towards catching up with the Germans and demonstrate internationally that the British trend was on its way to be at the cutting edge of the development of the profession.

THE CONFERENCE

As is the case with all conventional phrases, "town planning" has different meanings in different mouths. To the medical officer of health it means sanitation and healthy houses; to the engineer, trams and bridges and straight roads, with houses drilled to toe a line like soldiers. To some it means opens spaces; to the policeman regulation and traffic; to others a garden plot to every house, and so on. To the architect it means all these things, collected, considered, and welded into a beautiful whole. (RIBA, 1911, p. iv)

This is how John Simpson, secretary-general to the TPC, summarises one of the main intentions of the Conference: to legitimate the leadership role architecture should have in the emerging discipline. At the same time, this statement puts architecture at the forefront of town planning and sets distance from the late 19th century public health and engineering approaches. Architecture could provide a comprehensive framework, an approach that would put the new field both in the realms of art and of science. In this regard, the cover of the handbook given to participants could not be more explicit, for it exhibited one of British most famous scientists and architects, Sir Christopher Wren. The symbolism behind that choice goes further than the link between science and art, reinforcing even

further how the scope of architecture could be extended to the design of the whole urban phenomenon.

The conference had, in our perspective, three main roles. Firstly, it would expose the importance of architectural considerations in planning, the role architecture could play in bringing together art and science in the development of the new discipline. Secondly, it should present to the public examples of the ideas and best practice around the world, and by doing so directly inform local authorities who had to prepare schemes under the 1909 Act.¹ It was also an opportunity to display what the British were doing at that moment, and guarantee a respectful position at international level.

In the first months of 1910, arrangements were being made for the conference that should be held in London in July. However, with the death of the King Edward VII, who had accorded his patronage to the event, it has been postponed to October 10-15 of the same year (RIBA, 1910b). The event would be comprised of paper sessions, the exhibitions, site visits and other social events. There were five sessions, comprising paper presentations on "Cities of the Past", "Cities of the Present", "City Development and Extension", "Cities of the Future", and "Architectural Considerations in Town Planning".

Since the beginning, an international exhibition was intended to run parallel to the paper presentations. It was seen as a great opportunity to put before the public the best work produced nationally and internationally on the subject. The organizing committee intended to present the "finest exhibition of its kind" (RIBA, 1911), which should excel the one in Berlin held just some months before. The galleries of the Royal Academy were used for this purpose and held more than 1000 plans and models. Germany, as the leading nation in the field, was by far the largest contributor to the exhibition with plans for the Great Berlin Competition, for Munich, Cologne, Dusseldorf, Nuremberg and others; followed by the United States, centred in Burnham's Chicago plan; Britain, mostly with Letchworth and garden suburbs such as Hampstead, Bournville and Port Sunlight; France, with plans for Paris; and other minor contributors such as Italy, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries (RIBA, 1910c). There were also two more exhibitions, one at the Guildhall displaying maps and plans of London, and the other at the premises of the RIBA on town planning literature.

The transactions of the Town Planning Conference were published in 1911, consisting of a complete record of the proceedings and images of the work exhibited at the Royal Academy. This book has become a fundamental reference for the study of town planning at that moment, comprising of papers by the most significant practitioners and theoreticians on urban planning.

Amongst the discussions, the disputes between schools of thought were clearly present. The role history can play in modern urban planning was the main object of the debates held under the session "Cities of the Past". The main contributions came from Gardner, with a study on the Hellenistic cities; Haverfield, on the Roman cities and Brinckman with a paper on the

¹ There are several mentions in the documents produced by the organizing committee of the Conference to its public duty in informing local authorities with the best practice around the world. See, for example: (RIBA, 1910c, 1910d)

development of city design since the Renaissance. His work was very important as it brought up examples of ancient ideal schemes where he identified models of city expansion, in rectangular and/or radiating lines. These discussions are by no means overcome, and are present in the contemporary discourses of trends such as the New Urbanism.

The German and British works presented an empiricist approach - which could be traced back to the philosophical tradition of Bacon, Locke and Hume and was also informed by the romanticism of Ruskin - with particular focus on the importance of understanding the site, its history and specificities. The irregularity and picturesqueness of their work presented a defined set of artistic values and beliefs that would characterize most of their production. The French and the Americans, on the contrary, based their plans on the *beaux-arts* principles derived from revisions of the French neoclassicism, relying on the rationalist Cartesian tradition. This differentiation between the two groups is not only observable in their works exhibited at the Royal Academy, but also through their speeches. Whilst a comprehensive plan, the respect for the existing city, for the topography and property lines were some of the main preoccupation in the German and British practices, as can be seen in Stübben's selection of that country's examples he presented at the conference or in Unwin's garden suburbs; the imposition of baroque avenues and monuments on the existing urban fabric by architects like Burnham, in his plan for Chicago, or by Louis Bournier, in Paris, denoted a completely different approach. Raymond Unwin, in his paper at the TPC, makes explicit these contrasting views:

The importance of so designing the plan of a town that interesting and beautiful street pictures can be created as a result of it has been very fully recognised by the Germans, in the strong reaction which has taken place in their cities against the geometrical style of town planning which they followed in the early years of the modern revival of the art; and, while we in this country may learn much from the splendidly broad lines upon which some of the great town planning schemes of America have been laid out, I trust that we shall learn from the German school both a greater respect for the opportunities afforded by the undulations and other characteristics of the site and a greater appreciation of the importance of the possibilities which town planning affords for the creation of beautiful street pictures. (Unwin, 1910, p. 259)

Luque highlighted how, in the TPC, certain disregard towards the City Beautiful, represented by Burnham and Robinson, was manifested by their British and German counterparts. Even in the United States, since the *National Conferences on City Planning*, the City Beautiful was losing space to *City Planning*, in its more comprehensive approach to planning (Luque, 2004, p. 11). Manieri-Elia is even more precise as he defines the birth of *City Planning* in 1907, as a raising trend in replacement of the falling City Beautiful (In Ciucci, 1988, p. 119).

The bibliography has already made clear the leading role in city planning the German experience had since the unification of the country in 1871. This process of national constitution facilitated the growth of industrialization, state control over the land and the emergence of a great number of extension plans all over the German territory (Luque, 2004; Piccinato, 1974; Sutcliffe, 1981; Ward, 2010). At that time, the haussmanian works in Paris had a great impact

upon the first German attempts in organizing the expansion of their industrial towns. However, in the late quarter of the 19th century, there was a turn towards more sensitive approaches to the existing urban conditions, which were attuned with the growth of studies on the German gothic and the medieval towns.

The German expertise in the discipline came across in London not only with the exhibition, but also with the papers and discussions led by the likes of Stübben, Eberstadt, Hegeman and Brickman, where the will to blend science and art was clearly present. On the one hand, the engineering background developed in Germany in the first half of the 19th century - with the creation of polytechnic schools, such as those in Karlsruhe in 1825, Munich in 1827 and Dresden in 1828 – created the framework for the development of systematic and scientific studies of the cities and their planning. On the other hand, fundamentally from the theoretical studies by Brinckman on ancient urban settlements and by Camillo Sitte on the beauty and picturesque quality of the medieval towns, there was also a widespread understanding of town planning as art. These authors' move away from the Haussmannian approach of formal and geometrical plans towards variety, irregular and picturesque proposals was highlighted in many texts (Baxter, 1909; Sica, 1980, p. 260).².

Apart from the plans exhibited and Hegeman's contributions to the debates, the German participation in the TPC can be basically resumed to the presentations by Joseph Stübben and Rudolf Eberstadt, two of the main planners in the period. Stübben was by far the main authority in the field. Published just one year after Sitte's book *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, from 1889, Stübben's handbook *Der Städtebau: Handbuch der Architektur*, 1890, is one of the most fundamental readings that influenced the development of the German trend.

Stübben's text "Recent Progress in German Town Planning" looked at the state of the art in Germany and their recent experiences. It can be said that the *Städtebau* plans at that period carefully intervened within the existing town and undertook a comprehensive approach to the extension plans, which generally included: the creation of green belts and boulevards in the place of the old city walls, the provision of variety and irregularity in the urban fabric, the constitution of traffic systems based on radial arteries and the establishment of park systems. These were all visible elements in the city plans presented by Stübben. The author also reflected upon the development of that trend:

Paris was at one time our great teacher. The symmetrical French style was predominant in Germany until the eighties, when architects began to abandon straight lines and uniform treatment in favour of variety and curved forms, and medieval towns came to be studied as they had never been in the past". (Stübben In RIBA, 1911, p. 309).

² Baxter's comments on the German "new" planning approach, can be resumed by this quote: "*The new art, as practiced in Germany, is a gradual development away from formal and geometrical ideas embodied in the checkerboard and gridiron plans that, in fact, derive themselves from a remote antiquity rather than from a Philadelphia modernity, and from the diagonal and radial systems for which the plans of Paris and Washington, as , masterworks of their kind, are prototypes*". <http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/baxter.htm>

Rudolf Eberstadt presented his entry, alongside Richard Petersen and Bruno Möhring, to the Greater Berlin Competition. This plan, which had been highly praised by Unwin after his visit to the Berlin *Stadtebau Ausstellung* (Unwin, 1910), brought about a critical reflection on the repetition of the concentric pattern of growth of the Continental cities in modern town planning and introduces his idea of green wedges. Eberstadt stated:

I believe that every ring is, whatever its name may be, is injurious and hurtful to town extension (...). We must break down the ring; the pattern for modern town extension is the radial pattern. The backbone of town extension is formed by the traffic line. The open spaces are not green islands accidentally dispersed round the town, but systematically arranged, so as to procure open spaces and circulation of fresh air in all parts of the town. (Eberstadt In RIBA, 1911, p. 326)

Eberstadt draws attention to the role traffic lines should have in guiding not only the city's growth, but also the disposition of its open spaces. These should be created along them, as channels of greenery, light and fresh air. Their wedge form – wider on the countryside and narrower in the city centre – was thought to maximize and direct the flow, but also to follow the logic that land on the outskirts was cheaper and therefore easier for local authorities to convert into parks. He used two contrasting diagrams to convey his conceptions, which were also published in his book *Handbuch der Wohnungswesen und der Wohnungsfrage* (1909).

Interestingly enough, Eberstadt was not the only one to present the green wedges idea at this conference. H. V. Lanchester showed a diagram of a generic model city in which green wedges were depicted between factory areas, from the countryside down to the city centre, cutting through residential districts. During the debate over this presentation, G. T. Plunkket showed sympathy for the idea, stating that radiating parks “*ought to be very carefully considered*”. In Plunkket's paper, rather than considering them as urban parks, they were thought to be stretches of natural scenery, strips of countryside within the city, as reserves for wild creatures. Instead of suggesting that they should follow the radial arteries of the traffic system, as previously indicated by Eberstadt and Lanchester, Plunkket proposes that they should be created along the rivers and brooks. The ecological sensitiveness of this author is remarkable, as his proposal not only tries to integrate the urban rivers into green landscapes – offering the city the beneficial presence of nature and a link to the countryside – but also protect them from degradation and pollution (Plunkket In RIBA, 1911). Therefore, Plunkket is presenting an early ecological and aesthetic sensibility towards preserving nature, announcing here the importance of an environmental dimension in urban planning, which became a common practice contemporarily. Plunkket's idea is today defended as “greenways” or “green corridors”.

The British contribution was evidently large, and mostly built upon the development of Howard's garden city idea and the creation of the garden suburbs. There was also specific solutions destined to be applied to the metropolis, London, and discussions round suburban development and the provision of parks.

Howard himself presented a paper in which he defended the creation of towns from scratch, based on his theorisation of the garden city idea, which was in line with other proposals such as Arthur Crow's most interesting discussion on the construction of "Ten cities of Health" around the capital. It is clearly an adaptation of Howard's sociable cities diagram to the case of London and an early precedent of the New Towns that would emerge in Britain after the War.

Unwin, who had published *Town Planning in Practice* the year before (1909), focused on street and block design, mostly for garden suburbs, and the importance of comprehensive plans as opposed to superficial stylistic solutions. As Stübben, Unwin believed in the creation of diverse urban patterns which should attend functional criteria at the same time they provided beautiful solutions. The return to nature was also a fundamental argument for Unwin, and the other British presenters. Thomas Mawson, for instance, also defended the combination of formal and informal lines in the design of parks and in the importance of providing the cities with a necessary provision of greenery. Mawson draws attention to the role of the urban park in the modern city and the creation of interconnected green spaces, which today we call green infrastructures. Although we cannot say Mawson and Plunket were introducing the idea of sustainability, they were definitely raising ecological issues so important today.

Pepler's investigation led to the proposition of a ring road surrounding the Greater London, which would not only provide a means by which a great deal of traffic would circle the city, rather than crossing through, but also provide a framework for the creation of a belt of garden suburbs around the capital. This proposal also drew upon Howard's idea and related directly to Crow's plans for the capital.

Geddes was another distinguished British participant at the TPC. He defended the survey as a tool to planning and presented his work for Edinburgh, which had a special room at the exhibition in the Royal Academy.

The French and American contributions to the debates were dominated by the presentations by Charles M. Robinson, Daniel Burnham and Eugène Hénard. Robinson focused on the critique of measures to standardise road widths. Burnham's presentation was entitled "A city of the future under a Democratic Government". He highlighted some of the USA experiences in town planning, such as the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the subsequent plan for the city (which also had a special at the exhibition in the Royal Academy), the plans for San Francisco, Cleveland, Ohio, Washington, among others. Burnham explored, from the formality of the academicism and the belief in progress of the Positivism, a relationship between "good order and its consequent beauty" and the future of democratic plans. He defended the role of the State to develop "popular intelligence", which would allow the commoner to appreciate this particular approach to town planning (Burnham In RIBA, 1911, p. 371). These beliefs in order, progress, imposition of reason upon nature and the need to educate the populace were all formative not only of most of the approaches by academic projects in the 1920s, but also by modern movement architects, particularly Le Corbusier, which have impacted upon the planning of many cities across the globe.

Hénard exposed a “city of the future”, which is a fundamental text both because of its modernisation of the *beaux-arts* legacy, its solutions to circulation, green spaces and street patterns, but also because of its influence on other professionals, such as Le Corbusier.

As we see, the interchange of ideas was intense and multidirectional. The conference had 1500 delegates from all over the world and the exhibition was considered to have been the best ever organised until then. The TPC was a moment of consolidation of the British and German trends as the main leading approaches to town planning, and of revisions of the inheritance Haussmann and the American griddle had left.

CONCLUSIONS

The First Town Planning Conference was the moment of consolidation of the most important trends in the formation of Town Planning as a modern discipline. The German *Städtebau* kept its leading role in comprehensive planning, the British production became recognized in its development of the garden city idea and the most academic approaches of the City Beautiful and the French revisions of the Haussmannism faced a moment of challenge. This does not mean that the different lines of thought were compartmentalised. On the contrary, although there were common elements of alignment within each of these approaches, the TPC was a catalyst for the interchange of ideas. This is clearly visible in the works of the following decade, when the comprehensiveness of the German plans were more and more adopted by other countries, as well as in the great expansion of the garden cities and garden suburbs around the globe. The ideological opposition between formal/informal was challenged in a vast number of projects by authors like Unwin, Forestier, Nolen, Mawson, Abercrombie, etc.

Far from being an event only with historical interest, it is striking how most of the discussions held at that time are still relevant today. The formality/informality of the urban pattern, the need for an in-depth understanding of the place, the call for interdisciplinary approaches in planning, the debates around the preservation/creation of networks of green spaces, all of that is part of our contemporary discussions. Not to forget the role of history and tradition in city planning, discussed in one of the sessions of the TPC, in contemporary examples, such as those defended by the *New Urbanism* movement.

Taking as an example the British case, it is undeniable that some of the ideas discussed at the TPC in 1910 had a definitive influence in the construction of modern Britain both before and after WWII, particularly the creation of garden cities and the suburban expansion. Howard's garden city idea and Crow's “Ten Cities of Health” were fundamental precedents for Abercrombie's Greater London Plan 1943 and the development of the New Towns. Today, we can see how this legacy is visible in British life and in the development of new urban settlements, such as the eco-towns.

As already mentioned, the will to bring back nature to the cities in organized network of green spaces, as formulated by Olmsted and debated by Eberstadt, Lanchester, Unwin, Stubben and many others at the TPC, is today understood

as *green infrastructures* and is part of planning policy. The creation of *greenway, which is widely accepted today, was already discussed by Eberstadt and Plunkket's* at that time.

In these 100 years, it is time to celebrate the achievements that the cumulative process of enquiry established by the early pioneers have promoted. To try to understand the processes and pathways town planning has taken from that period onwards without investigating the role the RIBA Town Planning Conference had is, from our perspective, to tell an incomplete story.

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