'Windows Upon Planning History’ conference at the University of Kassel, Germany, 7-9 February 2013

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‘Windows Upon Planning History’ conference at the University of Kassel, Germany, 7–9 February 2013

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The meeting in Kassel for the ‘Windows Upon Planning History’ conference in February 2013 was distinguished by a list of speakers and panellists that looked like a who’s who of planning history – certainly as far as the German scene was concerned. But the UK and Australia were well represented too, and one speaker and panellist each from France, Italy, Poland, and the USA were included.

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In a sense, it was Karl Friedhelm Fischer’s farewell conference before his move to the University of New South Wales, Sydney. But beyond this personal context, the ‘Windows’ conference has to be seen in the context of a generational change in German planning history; half a dozen positions in the field have been vacated in recent years without replacement in the same vein. Therefore, the conference had the additional function of a kind of stock-taking of the situation of planning history in Germany, within an international context.

The conference theme, too, was concerned with change – with changing perceptions, eye-openers, eureka moments, twists, reversals, and paradigm changes. A set of central, connecting questions asked: What is the nature of the paradigm changes in planning and society with which we are dealing? Why do we have the recurring experience of suddenly seeing the world in a new light, from a new perspective, out of a new window? And what can we say about the view we had before? ‘From Ebenezer Howard to Jane Jacobs – or was everything wrong?’, as Hannover’s eminent planner of the post-war period, Rudolf Hillebrecht, was asking in 1965.

Another question was: Do new revelations and insights contradict and reverse what looked like conventional wisdom, at least to some, or do they complement and enrich our understanding and simply empower us to act more effectively from the perspective of an advanced understanding of the whole?

From the perspective of planning theory, we may also ask: Are the new paradigms and ‘ways of seeing’ expressions of radically different phases, possibly in the sense of Copernican turn-arounds, one phase terminating the previous? Or are we dealing with layers, one resting on top of the other?

In some cases, new views and positions in planning history are based on surprising discoveries, sometimes experienced as almost earth shaking, at least by some. One example is the moment in Germany when the window on the personal continuities between pre- and post-World War II was opened, and the myth surrounding ‘Zero Hour’ in post-war planning was shattered by the recognition that many influential post-war figures had held important positions in the Third Reich. Discoveries of surprising material behind the Iron Curtain or through access to previously unopened archives have produced similar results.

In other cases, the contribution of planning history was more one of re-visioning, of taking a fresh look at familiar contexts, questioning myths and differentiating traditional theories, possibly to interpret opposing views as in fact complementary.

Re-visioning Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses, as well as the debates on Berlin’s ‘rental barracks’ and ‘International Building Exhibitions’ are cases in point as are, at a more general level, the discussions about modernism, Fordism, and their ‘posts’. The history of participation and community movements in planning may not reach back very long. But while the interaction of public and private actors in planning can be traced back over centuries, it was only in the 1980s that the invention of the governance paradigm led to a new understanding of the mechanisms in this field.

In order to approach this theme of changing perceptions and inversions, the conference made use of a simple heuristic model: a metaphor based on a famous key passage of modern literature. In the preface to The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James suggested that:

[...the house of fiction has ... not one window, but a million ... At each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes ... He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the...]

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other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees
small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on . . .

While for the fiction author, the important message is that there is no limit to the number of
windows upon ‘reality’ that can be opened, the message is different for planners and architects
who have to be able to develop strategies and contribute to making the city. When they open
new windows, they are guided by a pragmatic interest. Each newly opened window may lead
to a better understanding of the whole, the potential to act more efficiently, or to act in a
more just, more sustainable way, depending on the cognitive interest, the Erkenntnis-Interesse.
It is obvious that the new perspectives gained are much more than whims, curiosities, or per-
sonal views. The radically different views could be as clear-cut as in the Copernican case.
They could also be as difficult to reconcile as the interpretations of light as either waves or
particles.

So how do we deal with these different views in which one sees black and the other sees white?
Clearly, neither Jane Jacobs nor Robert Moses has motivated the other to look through their
window. They stand as representatives for the enormously important paradigm change from mod-
ernism to post-modernism. This is a broadly based cultural change, not a paradigm change limited
to the scientific community. From this perspective, and with this understanding of the window
metaphor, the conference opened a number of windows upon planning history.

While the conference also revolved around some fundamental evergreens, it seemed
occasionally in danger of exploding due to the complexity of approaches and the multiplicity
of associations they produced. When we go about distilling some key thoughts about possible
future directions of planning history, we might consider that, as the post-modern philosopher
Paul Feyerabend put it, science can somehow be seen as art. We are increasingly aware that
the complexity of society must be borne in mind while practicing social science-related research.
In the field of planning, Horst Rittel has applied the notion of wicked problems to explain a fund-
damental difference between natural and social sciences and to remind us of the difference
between conventional engineering problems and planning.

When we apply the window metaphor to planning history in general, we will easily see that
new windows can trigger entire new strands of research. However, the underlying mechanism
should not be understood as a result of merely approaching old, unresolved questions neglected
in a growing body of knowledge, or, in other words, exploring a new little branch on a mature
tree. Rather, completely new ways of seeing the world result in completely new questions, redir-
ecting attention towards new trees that were maybe invisible through previously open windows.
Scientific progress is then, to a certain extent, a result of the creative process of posing comple-
tely new questions and exploring completely new fields of research. Nevertheless, one might
also apply the window metaphor to the exploration of additional questions that produce
additional knowledge in a well-established field.

In this respect, Stephen Ward gave an accurate account in his keynote lecture, describing the
scholarly environment in which we are operating as the ‘new planning history’. He emphasized
that the essential difference between the old and the new planning history lies in the contextual
role that is given to society in exploring and explaining planning phenomena, be they at the level
of designs or realized projects.

The related paradigms put socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts at the centre of
scholarly interest, as evidenced in Michael Edwards’ analysis of power structures in London,
Sebastian Haumann’s review of protest movements, Harald Kegler’s account of developments in the former German Democratic Republic, and Max Welch-Guerra’s survey of one significant path in the development of planning historiography in Germany. Robert Freestone, Elizabeth Farrelly, and Susanne Hauser then set out to explore how our way of seeing the world is shaped and how this influences our research, without losing themselves in post-modern relativism.

However, the operation of contemporary scholarly research in planning history sometimes seems to enforce conformist ‘scientific craftsmanship’ rather than creative debate. This critique seemed to dominate the discussion following Stephen Ward’s talk, despite his impressive attempt to be as wide and open as possible in his overview. Still, he provoked some remarkable responses when it came to framing what planning history should be about, and the ensuing discussion especially called for greater attention towards the global south that has been neglected, despite the increasing interest in mega-urban development in Asia. It would require new methodologies, new networks, and newly directed mechanisms of generating attention to include other forms of planning or production of space that seem to be of interest here. This process may open new windows, with consequences for planning policy. In the course of the conference, a number of further controversies emerged including the re-visioning of Fascism in Europe as presented by Harald Bodenschatz (included in the IPHS Section of this issue).

Between Jeffry Diefendorf’s account of the paradigm changes in the transport planning history of Boston and the astonishing (re)discoveries of research on the connections of urban weather and urban design by Michael Hebbert, the conference contributions showed there is no clear-cut limit to what planning history should focus on. Rather, its perspective should complement comparative research on planning cultures. While the latter approach tries to vary the perspective in space, planning history does so in time, not only looking for similarities and differences, continuities, and ruptures, but also seeking to understand the universe of planning practices as an inexhaustible laboratory or reservoir of empirical material waiting for exploration in a systematic fashion.

The analyses by many speakers showed that by producing a better understanding of the genesis of our current urban condition, we may engender a better approach to planning our common future. This would distinguish planning history from a mere forensic enterprise that chases up the plan that has never been published or the quote nobody remembers, while its wider context and its particular relevance remains unquestioned. In this sense, James Weirick provided an inspiring exploration of the windows metaphor in his presentation on how community groups have mobilized planning history to influence public debate, change design outcomes, and make profound contributions to city culture.

For a future debate on planning history, the conference made clear that the ongoing generational change mentioned above should make us reflect newly upon some classical questions. They concern the way our research agendas are constituted, the necessarily interdisciplinary methodological approaches, the role of comparative research, and the research networks that serve our research interests best. Besides, the criteria for progress in planning history will have to be clarified so as to overcome a one-sided emphasis on empiricism – at the expense of structural understanding – as criticized by Stephen Ward during the conference. Finally, the uncontroversial quality standards of the planning history community have not always resulted in a broad dissemination of new knowledge. However, this will be necessary to cope effectively with the marginalization of planning in the context of architectural education, the sometimes limited
interests of students in our work and the unresolved question of how historical evidence and expertise may influence contemporary planning debates and decisions more successfully.

Tied together by a theoretical chapter by the conference hosts in Kassel, the collected papers, published in book form, will be much more than a volume of conference proceedings. Its nature is that of an exploration of a fundamental research question based on the contributions of a range of the world’s most experienced planning historians addressing some of the open questions concerning the future of planning history.

Notes on contributors

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Prof. Dr. Karl Friedhelm Fischer is a visiting professor in the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales, where he was acting director of the Master of Urban Development and Design Course in 2013. He studied planning and urban design in Aachen, Berkeley and Canberra and taught urban design, planning and planning history in Aachen, Berkeley, Hamburg and Kassel. He also has a degree in English/American Literature (Aachen). In recent years, he was a professor for ‘History and Culture of the Metropolis’ at the Harbor City University, Hamburg. Since 1992 and again between 2009 and 2013, he taught urban regeneration and planning history at the School of Architecture, Urban Planning & Landscape Planning at the University of Kassel, Germany. One focus of his research and teaching has been on internationally comparative perspectives in urban development and design (Germany/Australia/UK/USA/France). Professional affiliations include membership in Architects’ Chamber, Hamburg, and Deutscher Werkbund. As a consultant, he has been involved with design competitions and consultant reports for planning departments in Berlin, Magdeburg and Luebeck. He was a review editor for ‘Planning Perspectives’ until 2004, and has been on the Editorial Board of ‘Progress in Planning’ since 2004. He is a member of the AESOP Best Paper Prize Committee and was a German CoRep (Council Representative) of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) 2008-2013.