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EDITORIAL



What is radical planning history?

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Since the early days of urban reform, spatial planning has based its legitimacy on the pursuit of the common good, the protection of the public interest and a promise to improve living conditions, particularly among vulnerable populations. Yet, the current state of the planetary urban condition reveals the limited impact of this foundational progressive aspiration. In light of this, it is striking that planning history – one of the discipline’s most powerful discursive resources – has not prioritized issues of social justice or questioned the validity of those core principles despite their partial and often problematic implementation in the past. Today, over a century after the publication of the first modern analyses examining the evolution of urban planning, the field reflects a reluctant maturity. Planning history has become more rigorous and empirically sharp, expanding its geographical scope – though often unevenly, with limited attention to certain areas in the Global South – and advancing more robust, authoritative narratives. But, in general, it still remains sceptical of approaches that are openly critical of planning’s past, hesitant to embrace perspectives that foreground the plight of disadvantaged groups and reticent to theoretical innovation or cross-fertilization with related research in urban studies and the social sciences. In my opinion, these limitations are not merely a matter of political priorities. They expose an epistemological problem in the field – one that hinders a fuller understanding of planning’s genealogies, its latent potential and our capacity to shape ongoing debates about cities, the urban condition and the future of society.

Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need for questions that push the field in new directions. Can we approach the history of urbanization and spatial politics in a way that does justice to the plight of vulnerable populations and their struggle to assert their right to the city? Can these experiences be more consistently integrated into our studies, just as they have been in other strands of contemporary urban research? Would this enable our work to resonate more widely with broader analyses of social and political transformation – across disciplines and beyond the academic sphere? In other words, is it possible to write a history of planning and urbanism that sheds light not only on the evolution of cities and urbanization, but also on the wider structural forces that shape them?

The project of radical planning history offers a critical, positive response to these questions. Expanding and deepening existing heterodox approaches, it provides a comprehensive framework for rethinking both planning ideologies and the epistemological foundations of the field, making our research not only more politically engaged but also more intellectually vibrant. Radical planning history is ‘radical’ because (a) it prioritizes grassroots perspectives, pursuing a history-from-below approach, (b) it revisits planning’s foundational ideals, restoring the latent utopian surplus embedded in the discipline’s progressive roots, and (c) it calls for fundamental, paradigm-shifting changes in our analytical strategies if our research is to remain relevant to contemporary urban struggles and conflicts.

The following offers a preliminary, tentative exploration of this terrain of inquiry, focusing on its epistemological implications. I discuss various shortcomings in conventional planning history and their effects on planning ideologies, examine how related fields such as urban theory and social history have embraced critical perspectives and suggest various developments and methodological innovations to advance an alternative, radical paradigm.

Problems and challenges in dominant planning history

The health of a discipline can be measured by the breadth and complexity of the questions it aims to answer. Thus, we may begin by interrogating the most ambitious, advanced expression in our field: the genre of grand-narrative planning histories working with panoramic perspectives. This approach embodies both the greatest strengths and the deepest vulnerabilities of historical research. It constitutes a powerful discursive platform with the capacity to distil and shape planning's identity, but it also exposes the field's epistemic limits and internal tensions.¹

Longue-durée studies usually operate within the framework of intellectual or institutional history. They focus on planning ideas or eminent planning thinkers, professional cultures and key organizations, prioritizing the analysis of how certain paradigms, techniques, regulatory apparatuses and design schemes succeed, fail and circulate. Comparatively little attention is given to the impact of planning initiatives on the social spaces and everyday practices of vulnerable groups, which are often presented as passive subjects in need of reform. Unable to grasp the many dramas of spatial transformation, these approaches tend to remain indifferent to the complex impact of urbanization on subaltern communities and ignore their creative abilities to use space as a source of collective power. In other words, we miss that element of social history which depicts 'the poor' or 'the working classes' as real people with real lives, not just statistics. To counter this tendency, critical analyses that take planning's progressive claims seriously should focus on how techniques work through the lived experience of their target populations, scrutinizing their actual capacity to support deprived groups and shape urbanization as a liberating process.

Many valuable critical interventions follow this alternative approach, but they often focus on singular case studies dealing with specific problematics, policies, design strategies or time periods. Essential though they are, these contributions usually lack a structural, panoramic perspective, the type of narrative with the capacity to shape planners' self-perception or to capture the attention of broader audiences. A limited number of classic contributions incorporate both critical and long-term views, beginning perhaps with Lewis Mumford and later with such authors as Leonardo Benevolo, Richard Foglesong or Leonie Sandercock, whose work might be regarded as part of the genealogy of radical planning history.² Sandercock's subsequent call for a social turn in historical research posed a fresh challenge to orthodox assumptions in the field.³ However, almost three decades later this (still) budding tradition has not produced a significant paradigm shift – especially in the realm of sweeping, longue-durée narratives. Besides, this line of work is not without its own shortcomings. The critical planning history advocated by Sandercock developed alongside the rise of poststructuralist and intersectional perspectives in urban studies and following the cultural turn in social history, so the contributions in this tradition have prioritized central aspects of

¹For an analysis of the strengths and pitfalls of panoramic historical inquiry see Guldi and Armitage, *History Manifesto*, and Foucault, *Archeologie du savoir*, 9–28. For a more extended discussion of the limitations of dominant approaches in planning history see Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons*, 7–13.

²Benevolo, *Origini dell'urbanistica*; Foglesong, *Planning the Capitalist City*; Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*; Sandercock, *Cities for Sale*.

³Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis*, 33–54.

identity politics such as gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality.⁴ As a result, these approaches tend to sideline a crucial, persistent dimension of sociospatial differentiation and regulation under capitalism: class conflict. Despite their enduring, generative role in shaping capitalist urbanization and planning policy, class inequality and class struggle have too often been treated as secondary in heterodox planning histories.

Returning to the problems of orthodox approaches, a further limitation of dominant panoramic accounts is their functionalist orientation, which hinders deeper interrogation of the very premises of planning practice. Planning is usually framed as an external, neutral set of ad hoc instruments created to solve specific conflicts in different urbanization stages. The problematic may vary – industrial cities, laissez-faire or informal urbanism, the declining metropolis, climate emergency, etc. – but planning policies are typically presented as remedial, palliative strategies devised to restore a balance disrupted by economically induced sociospatial change, an instrument independent of the forces that drive capitalist development. This narrative creates an aura of neutrality and autonomy, but it also obscures the understanding of planning as a sphere of social struggle – a realm internal to processes of social change, sometimes emerging through the dynamics that drive urbanization and produce urban conflicts, sometimes itself a trigger of such conflicts. The adoption of one viewpoint or the other – functionalism vs. conflict theory – has important implications, not only political but also, and perhaps fundamentally, epistemological. For instance, the problem of periodization, the way we frame the origin and goals of planning, the forces behind its evolution or the question of how we conceive planning's role in societal transformation and power dynamics change drastically if we substitute theories of conflict for dominant functionalist-instrumental perspectives.

These constraints and the limited impact of alternative approaches are in part related to a lack of conceptual experimentation which is strange for a century-old field.⁵ Mature research areas in the social sciences and humanities – including the work of our colleagues in urban history and urban studies – are typically shaped by pluralist, sometimes contentious debates following decades of interaction between established and emerging paradigms. As Simon Gunn suggests, recent trajectories of historical inquiry have also been shaped as much by tensions between competing theoretical frameworks as by new empirical findings.⁶ Planning history, however, has remained largely insulated from theoretical innovation. It has prioritized expanding its geographical scope and deepening its engagement with core problematics and case studies, rather than advancing fresh analytical categories and conceptual tools. This emphasis on descriptive empiricism has often been viewed not as a shortcoming, but as a distinctive feature of the field – a source of stability that shields it from passing intellectual fads and fosters cohesion among planning historians.⁷ Yet, from a different angle, this same caution may be constraining the field's growth beyond a core community still closely tied to its roots in planning practice. More importantly, it may be limiting our ability to produce accounts that connect with wider intellectual debates within and beyond urban studies, speaking to audiences outside the field of planning and academia.

Learning from allied disciplines

As the limits of prevailing views become more apparent, there is a compelling need to renovate the conceptual and methodological frameworks that guide our analyses. Shifts in epistemic paradigms

⁴See e.g. Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*; Sandercock, *Making the Invisible Visible*; Spain, *How Women Saved the City*.

⁵I take as a reference point early contributions by authors such as Inigo Triggs, Pierre Lavedan or Marcel Pöete.

⁶Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory*, x.

⁷Ward et al, "The 'New' Planning History," 244–245.

often evolve through cross-pollination with other intellectual traditions, so efforts to advance new research directions may benefit from sustained dialogue with adjacent disciplines driven by a commitment to socially relevant and theoretically bold thinking. In particular, the project of radical planning history may draw valuable insights and strategies from potentially allied fields such as radical planning, radical history and critical urban theory. These kindred traditions share an aspiration to transcend established academic or technical approaches in order to engage progressive social forces and envision alternative urban and social futures.

The relatively minor but persistent tradition of radical planning constitutes a close and obvious source of inspiration. Although its roots might be traced much earlier, the paradigm emerged in its current form as a development of late-1950s and 1960s critical design and advocacy planning perspectives.⁸ It gathered momentum in the early 1970s among young planners and students dissatisfied with conventional practice and educational programmes focusing solely on professional training which were, according to them, unable to provide adequate responses to planning's most fundamental responsibility: the needs of vulnerable population groups. Challenging the status of technicians as experts, radical planners sought to promote alternative approaches that supported deprived communities through collaborative efforts and mutual learning strategies. This was soon followed by attempts to conceptualize the new line of action, beginning with a brief but seminal intervention by Stephen Grabow and Allan Heskin, who presented radical planning as a tool for achieving 'a decentralized communal society', a non-state platform facilitating collective decision-making about places.⁹

The concept gained theoretical depth in various seminal contributions by John Friedmann, especially his *Planning in the Public Domain*.¹⁰ Shifting attention from internal procedures and strategies to the substance of planning's social project and planners' positionality, he emphasized grassroots capacities to reorganize space and polity and urged practitioners to support these processes and fulfil the discipline's commitment to collective emancipation. Radical planning should pursue 'the structural transformation of industrial capitalism towards the self-production of life, ... the achievement of collective self-reliance ... and the recovery of political community', defined as 'civil society organized for a life in common'.¹¹ Drawing on anarchist, federalist and garden-city traditions, Friedmann focused on the local and regional scale as vital levels to achieve a thorough reorganization of political economy.¹² In recent decades, scholars using this framework have taken an even more critical stance, stressing the potential of community-led insurgent planning while exposing planning's persistent complicity with real estate and elite interests, including insidious forms of social control through so-called participatory methods.¹³ In sum, radical planning constitutes a bold, disruptive reappraisal of the prevailing assumptions and commitments that have long defined the discipline, reimagining its purpose, its beneficiaries and its modes of practice.

Radical history provides a less immediate but equally valuable reference. Part of a broader shift in historical scholarship, it emerged in the 1960s inspired by the rise of New Left politics and the growing influence of social history in the UK and the US.¹⁴ Fuelled by the transformative energy of civil rights movements, antiwar mobilizations and worker and student activism, the nascent tradition rejected conventional narratives by focusing on the struggles, material culture and agency

⁸Huq, "Seeing the Insurgent," 371–373; Inch et al, "Community Action."

⁹Grabow and Heskin, "Foundations," 109

¹⁰Friedmann, *The Good Society; Planning in the Public Domain*.

¹¹Friedmann, *Planning in the Public Domain*, 344, 412.

¹²*Ibid.*, 378, 382.

¹³Friedmann, *Insurgencies*; MirafTAB, "Insurgent planning."

¹⁴Gust, "What is Radical History"; Wiener, "Radical Historians."

of ordinary people rather than elites or state institutions. This form of ‘history from the bottom up’¹⁵ foregrounded the lived experience of exploitation, resistance and autonomy, conceiving historical inquiry as a tool for contemporary, progressive change. In this perspective, as Howard Zinn suggested, the value of history lay not only in its capacity to produce rigorous knowledge about the past, but also to promote social change in the present by looking back reflexively, in the light of current conflicts and concerns¹⁶ – a programmatic framing of the link between past and present that resonates with the applied spirit of planning history. According to Zinn, radical history contributes to this goal with five critical functions: it sharpens our awareness of injustice, exposes ideological mystifications, undermines complacency in institutions, illuminates emancipatory possibilities from the past and cautions against the ossification of transformative ideals.¹⁷

The paradigm has never been monolithic, ranging from Marxist to feminist, anticolonial, critical race and later poststructuralist approaches, from studies of class politics and economic history to everyday life and cultural identity. But despite their differences radical historians share a commitment to prioritize working with non-elite, non-state sources and perspectives to counter dominant narratives, as well as an aspiration to ‘bring the boundaries of history closer to people’s lives’,¹⁸ cooperating with communities in the production and circulation of historical knowledge. In that sense, Raphael Samuel insisted that history should be seen as ‘the work ... of a thousand different hands’,¹⁹ a collective social project and a form of democratic consciousness, not confined to academia.

Critical urban theory presents a similar genealogy but has been even more active in incorporating heterodox conceptual and methodological frameworks. Emerging in the late 1960s, it sought to break with mainstream urban studies and their instrumental alignment with prevailing policy approaches. Instead, critical urban theorists adopted an alternative orientation that emphasized the ‘politically and ideologically mediated ... character of urban space’.²⁰ In that sense, they have prioritized analyses of the power dynamics, inequalities, injustices and contradictions inherent in capitalist urbanization, as well as the exploration of emancipatory alternatives and the liberatory potential of urban phenomena.

Researchers in this tradition have consistently drawn from emerging paradigms in the broader social sciences and humanities to enrich their conceptual toolkits. In doing so, they have fully embraced intellectual diversity and controversy, which has rendered the field remarkably dynamic and creative in the development of innovative approaches. As a result, critical urban theory has become a pluralistic domain, often characterized by internal dispute but also driven by shared core features.²¹ In an influential attempt to map the field, Neil Brenner suggested that they include, a) an explicit engagement with ethical questions; b) a rejection of technocratic or positivist epistemologies that reproduce the contradictions and inequalities of existing urban formations; c) a commitment to exploring alternative forms of urbanism and the latent potentialities present within contemporary cities; and perhaps most importantly, d) a reflexive approach to research, demanding constant critique and renovation of epistemic, conceptual and methodological frameworks.²² These forward-looking orientations, continually energized by open debate and disagreement within the

¹⁵Lemisch, “Towards a Democratic History.”

¹⁶Zinn, *Politics of History*.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 36–54.

¹⁸*History Workshop Journal*, “Editorial,” 1.

¹⁹Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 8.

²⁰Brenner, “What is Critical Urban Theory,” 11.

²¹Brenner, “Debating Planetary Urbanization”; Van Meeteren et al, “Doing Global Urban Studies.”

²²Brenner, “What is Critical Urban Theory.”

field, have profoundly transformed the parameters of urban knowledge. Critical urban theory has unsettled not only our understanding of specific urban processes but also the very notion of the urban and urbanization itself, as exemplified by recent discussions around the concept of planetary urbanization. It is precisely this kind of transformative potential – challenging and reimagining our epistemological frameworks and the very conception of planning and urban governance – that an alternative planning history should aspire to achieve.

Projecting the past forwards

Drawing from this brief review, we can suggest some future developments to reorient research in our field in a similar, more critical progressive direction.

- *First*, radical planning history is a *history of the present*. It reads the past not as a closed chapter but as a terrain actively shaped by – and shaping – current conflicts and struggles. It acknowledges that the archive is always in tension with contemporary experience and draws on that tension as a source of critical insight and analytical possibility. Thus, rather than treating historical inquiry as detached or purely descriptive, this approach is programmatic: it positions the past – along with our very notions of space, planning and the urban – as dynamic objects of critique. In doing so, it refuses to separate historical analysis from contemporary political stakes, insisting instead that research serve as an intervention into ongoing debates about the trajectories of cities and society. In other words, radical planning history constitutes a tool not just for understanding what was, but for confronting what is.
- *Second*, radical planning history is *history from below*. It prioritizes grassroots perspectives and sources, community life and everyday, on-the-ground experience over institutional discourse or expert narratives. In that regard, it examines planning initiatives in terms of their tangible impacts on the social fabric, through an ethical engagement with the knowledge, practices and struggles of those directly affected by planning decisions. Rather than treating communities as passive recipients of policy, it foregrounds their agency – how they inhabit, contest and reshape urban space. The radical approach also rewrites *history from the margins*, amplifying the voices of excluded populations in both inner peripheries in core capitalist contexts and subaltern groups in the majority world to re-centre the subaltern experience. This bottom-up, peripheral view requires rethinking what counts as legitimate or valuable knowledge. Central to this is understanding how communities have represented and used their territory, the purposes these practices served and the extent to which planning either enabled or obstructed these ordinary urbanisms. These developments pose significant challenges for planning historians, as they entail technical difficulties that demand consistent theorization and bold archival strategies in the use of sources and in the application of new methods of inquiry.
- *Third*, radical planning history is a *history of the possible*. It looks to the past not only to understand what happened, but to uncover what *might* have happened and why certain conceptions of the urban came to be seen as inevitable. This approach seeks to unearth the repressed or overlooked potential within past urbanisms, tracing moments when alternative paths were imagined, attempted or suppressed. It treats historical narratives, community practices and urbanization itself as sites of latent emancipatory possibility, engaging them critically and creatively to liberate their transformative energy. In other words, the radical imagination conceives history not as a tool of closure, but of opening, a vehicle to revive and release the unfinished, the unrealized and

the still possible – what Ernst Bloch called the ‘surplus’ of past utopias.²³ Thus, radical planning history is not only a record of facts and outcomes, but a resource for building different urban futures.

- *Fourth*, this programme requires *new epistemologies of historical inquiry* that unsettle entrenched paradigms. We need a substantial amount of conceptual and methodological experimentation to rethink how historical knowledge is produced, by whom and for what purposes. Reconsidering our positionality as (radical) planning historians may also entail a deliberate loosening of disciplinary boundaries to make room for alternative approaches that foster a more fluid exchange with interlocutors in other areas within and beyond academia. These shifts should broaden the range of actors and voices that shape historical research and also, inevitably, lead to contested narratives and rivalling interpretations. But rather than aiming for consensus or disciplinary closure, we should accept that mature fields thrive on dialogical heterodoxy, scholarly controversy and generative disagreement. In embracing this form of engaged pluralism, historical research can become more responsive to the complexities of planning practice, urban life and contemporary social challenges.

These epistemological shifts call for a more reflexive mode of historical practice – one that, in turn, invites deeper engagement with theoretical perspectives. Interestingly, while planning *theory* has become increasingly open to heterodox paradigms in recent decades, it still struggles to reckon with the discipline’s problematic past. If it is to move beyond its traditional normative frameworks, planning theory may need to become more historically attuned and willing to confront an archive of contradictions and deviations from its core foundational principles. The relative disconnect between historical scholarship and theoretical discourse in planning brings into focus the need to explore their possible synergies and the disruptive potential such engagement might hold. In this light, grand-narrative histories should be renewed and reimagined as a powerful site of theoretical, epistemological and political intervention. They constitute a privileged genre that can inspire expansive, collective imaginaries while also facilitating the interplay between historical critique and conceptual experimentation in ways that more narrowly focused accounts often cannot. It is only by pursuing this more consistent articulation of history, theory and politics in our work that we may aspire to speak to broader analyses of social change and social conflict.

The above strategies can be advanced through a dual approach, combining critical and transformative perspectives. On the one hand, radical planning history is a *radical history of planning* as found in actual practice. In this view the aim of historical inquiry is not to validate planning, but to interrogate its role in shaping urbanization as a liberating or repressive force. Radical historians revisit the past to challenge dominant accounts, examining planning techniques not through institutional rhetoric, but at the point of implementation, through their situated effects – particularly on vulnerable populations. The goal, therefore, is to judge the field not by the ideals of practitioners, but by the actual consequences for those they claim to serve. On the other hand, radical planning history is also a *history of radical planning*. Alongside critique and denunciation, it seeks to reconstruct the efforts of communities organizing to use space and urbanization as sources of livelihood and power. These initiatives have sometimes received active support from trained planners and state institutions, and researchers must uncover such episodes and grant them the dignity they deserve vis-à-vis conventional planning schemes. Yet radical urbanization trajectories have also evolved through fully autonomous insurgent projects. Historians must address these

²³Bloch, *Principle of Hope*.

achievements too, giving them full recognition as crucial moments in the social production of space – moments from which we can draw essential lessons for a more equitable and democratic planning practice in the future.

Ultimately, these manoeuvres aim to cultivate a renewed form of historical consciousness about cities and urbanization. This project conceives the analysis of past spatial politics as a social, militant, collaborative endeavour – one that expands our historical imagination and planning’s vision in response to current challenges, struggles and collective aspirations. The agenda must be both rigorous and creative, remaining politically grounded while embracing theoretical audacity. What is at stake is not simply how we interpret urban policy and patterns of city development, but our capacity to generate deeper, more consistent knowledge of the socio-spatial dynamics we are immersed in, a knowledge that can inform wider reflections on social change. To paraphrase Howard Zinn’s²⁴ dictum about the relationship between history and social movements, the aim is not to turn us away from planning, but into critical participants in it, allies in ongoing emancipatory projects and progressive urban coalitions striving to produce more equitable cities. Radical planning history is nourished by the memory of communities once dispossessed or displaced by spatial politics and it looks ahead to a future in which planning is reclaimed and reimaged by their descendants.

Notes on Contributors

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²⁴Zinn, *Politics of History*, 52.

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