INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN
PLANNING HISTORY

Nancy H. Kwak

Planning history has been from its origins an interdisciplinary enterprise, and should be understood as a field rather than a discipline with a self-conscious, deeply rooted identity. Rather than insights from within planning history, this chapter offers more of a historian’s—and specifically, an urban historian’s—view. Both are necessary in understanding the field: planning history relied and continues to rely on a cross-fertilization of historical methods with planning practices; in tracing the intellectual lineage of historical developments within planning, scholars relied on research methods fundamental to the practice of history (the use of archival, primary, and secondary sources), as well as the spatial analysis and surveying techniques of planning. Over the course of the 20th century, writers of planning history also came to incorporate subject matter and approaches typically found within other disciplines and fields like architecture, sociology, geography, political science, economics, and anthropology. In so doing, these scholars were participants in a much larger interdisciplinary movement: in much the same way geographers actively engaged scholars across the humanities and social sciences in a theoretically rich study of the production of space, for instance, scholars across the disciplines made use of cultural anthropologist Frank Boaz’s insight that “any sense of unity that the concept of culture implicitly predicts for a group is really a subjective unity, one that is constituted only in the mind of the observer, such as a politician, a market strategist, an urban planner, an artist, or a social scientist” (Rotenberg, 2012). Some of the best planning histories, then, have explained the development of subjective unities—unities that were at times hegemonic, at other times fraying, and inconsistently produced by an array of historical actors that could (but did not always) include official urban planners.

An exploration of planning history thus requires a consideration of shifting interdisciplinary contributions and layering of methods. Embedded within this are interdisciplinary approaches to power and transnationality; postcolonial history and an increased scholarly interest in globalization and interconnectedness have critically influenced how planning historians frame the past. Intradisciplinary debates within history have shaped planning history, also, with social, cultural, and environmental “turns” in history influencing scholarship in important ways.

The Origins of Interdisciplinarity in Planning History

There are many reasons why interdisciplinarity played and continues to play such an integral part in planning history’s evolution. Planning history finds its roots in separate efforts to justify planning as a profession as well as to narrate the broader sweep of government efforts in shaping the
built form. In both professional and intellectual aspects, history and planning methods were present at the field’s conception. For American scholars, planning history emerged from urban history. Both planning fields conceptualized the city as a distinct entity, with planning history focusing more on the specific aspects of state order and governance within urban history’s emphases on cities and city-making processes. Urban history’s interdisciplinarity likewise shaped planning history, with community, postcolonial theory and design, and built environment studies making it all but impossible to examine governmental action without consideration of people, built form, and places. Put another way, interdisciplinarity loosened the boundaries of “planning” itself to be about much more than the state.

While various historiographers offer different birth dates for the start of urban history in the US, it is clear that by the 1930s, a new generation—the “new urban history”—drew strongly from both historical as well as sociological approaches (Abbott, 1996; Mohl, 2011). Within the discipline of history, urban historians challenged the primacy of the rural frontier in defining national character. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. set the foundations for a veritable cottage industry of urban histories with his monograph, *Rise of the City, 1878–1898* (Schlesinger, 1933), and critical essay, “The City in American History” (1940), in which he laid out a very different understanding of national expansion and identity than that put forward by Frederic Jackson Turner. (Turner famously argued in 1893 that Americans gained their exceptional identity—“that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness . . . that dominant individualism”—from the constant taming of the frontier.) At the same time that Schlesinger participated in this debate among historians, he also borrowed from the work of Chicago School sociologists in his socio-spatial and geographical approaches (Park, 1925). Schlesinger’s student Richard C. Wade continued expanding the burgeoning field, serving as “a pioneer in the interdisciplinary study of urban history,” and examining the city “as a living, breathing, complicated and not always harmonious organism” (Grimes, 2008; Wade, 1959). In Britain, historian Harold James Dyos pursued a similar vision of the modern city as a complex organism, writing of Victorian London in order to “make the city known to its citizens,” to “help people come to terms with the city and make sense of their environment” (Dyos and Wolff, 1973). Plans and planning mattered to these scholars as a part of an organized urbanism. Wade, for instance, argued Western cities’ grid format and adjacency to waterfronts represented “the difference between town organization and country life” (Wade, 1959).

Even as urban history gained momentum in the 20th century, interest in interdisciplinarity grew. Early writings by Karl Lamprecht, Henri Berr, James Harvey Robinson, Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and others urged bridge-building, collaboration, and even synthesis with scholarship from other disciplines (Horn and Ritter, 1986). During and immediately after World War II, scholars in “the arts, architecture, city planning, housing reform, [and] the social sciences” worked closely in both “historical study and professional practice” with a “commitment to the centrality of humanistic values in a troubled world, a sense of mission characteristic of academic discourse in the 1940s” (Wright, 1990). By the 1950s, works like David Potter’s *People of Plenty* resonated widely in the call for various disciplines—in Potter’s case, historians and behavioral scientists—to understand “that, if they are ever to scale the heights on which they hope to find a science of man, they must go roped together like other mountaineers” (Potter, 1954). Institutional changes mirrored intellectual ones: in the US, for example, universities established interdisciplinary American Studies programs during the 1950s and 1960s. The *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* was founded in 1970.

As more scholars pursued interdisciplinary approaches in these postwar decades, those interested in cities and plans began debating the very meaning of categories like “urban,” “urbanization,” and “cities.” Some called into question the feasibility of quantitative historical research by historians. Still others disagreed vigorously with each other about the possibilities of urban history as a
subject-field versus a scrutiny of “urban as process” (Lampard, 1961). Schlesinger’s student Oscar Handlin contended the modern city was an organ—“the heart, the brain . . . of that great leviant, the modern state”—and that there were as yet too many studies of the city in history, and too few of the history of cities (Handlin, 1966). It is unclear if Handlin meant to deliberately reference historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford’s natural history of urbanism, *The City in History* (Mumford, 1961), published a short five years earlier; for Mumford, sociological approaches came together with historical ones to reframe cities as a “theater of social action” where “unified plans and buildings become a symbol of [men’s] social relatedness” (Mumford, 1937). Social action, built form, and plans all interacted to produce an urbanism that could not be understood by any one of these elements alone. Whether explicitly directed at Mumford or no, Handlin was clearly dissatisfied with the state of the field, calling for a more rigorous examination of the historical development of the modern city. Mumford, for his part, was clearly concerned with the modern city even as he drew from sociologist, geographer, and town planner Patrick Geddes’s interdisciplinary methods to present a grand narrative of Western modernism. Like Geddes, Mumford adopted an eclectic mishmash of biological, sociological, geographical, and town planning approaches to tell this history (Geddes, 1915). Other scholars struggled with a lack of consensus about what precisely urban historians were studying. The application of a wide-ranging or indeterminate interdisciplinary approach resulted in what historian Francois Bedarida called “a series of scattered initiatives” and a confusion of approaches and topics (Bedarida, 1968; 1983). At the practical level, Theodore Hershberg put forward his assessment of limits rather bluntly: “the efforts of historians working as individuals to master new methods and techniques and read in the literature of other disciplines has on the whole been as entirely commendable as it has been hopelessly insufficient” (Hershberg, 1978). And from the point of view of planning history, urban historians emphasized city as form and function over city as object of policy—thus offering tacit commentary about the limited power of official policy and policy makers over a tumultuous, dynamic urbanism.

Planning history emerged in tandem with these debates. Key actors had interdisciplinary backgrounds: in Britain, Gordon Cherry trained in geography at Queen Mary College in London and worked in a city planning department before joining the Centre of Urban and Regional Studies in Birmingham University, neatly embodying in one scholar the disciplinary transitions between geography, planning, and planning history (Boulton, 1996). Cherry eventually worked closely with urban historian Anthony Sutcliffe to organize the professional scaffolding for planning history, including conferences and a society, the Planning History Group. Cherry, Sutcliffe, and members of the Planning History Group not only emerged from interdisciplinary training and work experiences; they also embraced interdisciplinary methods as a larger philosophical commitment to thinking about the modern city in a multidimensional, synthesized way. Disciplinary traditions mattered less than practical outcomes: methods were freely borrowed from geography, city planning, history, and more to improve urban policies and plans in the present and future. This sort of functional approach to the past has proved particularly persuasive in schools of planning; according to a recently published introductory urban and regional planning reader, the study of history continues to serve three purposes: “It builds professional identity. . . . It provides the context for understanding the origin and course of the planning decisions that affect contemporary conditions. It helps today’s students learn from past techniques to see what worked and what didn’t and to frame questions about how they will practice planning” (Birch, 2009).

**Interdisciplinary Approaches to Power in Planning**

For others, however, planning history held less prescriptive power. Planning needed to be considered as power and process, it was argued; planning history could draw more deeply from the
intersections of history with urban theory, anthropology, political science, and geography. Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault connected space with capitalism in powerful texts that resonated across disciplinary borders (Foucault, 1972; Lefebvre, 1974); David Harvey, Manuel Castells, and Peter Marcuse further developed this line of reasoning, applying Marxist theory to link planning with “a privileged facilitation of capitalist demands, and a purposeful neglect of social needs,” in the process challenging the characterization of planning as a benevolent act (Yiftachel, Goldhaber, and Nuriel, 2009). These and other related theorizations of power, space, and place produced what would eventually be known as the urban justice literature of the 1970s. Planning history as a field did not fundamentally transform as a result of these challenges, but instead splintered into different specialties.

In challenging frame as well as content, urban justice literature represented part of a much larger spatial turn—with space not merely as the repository for human history and activity, but rather as a production and a social process. This critical evaluation of space and spatiality emerged first from geography and quickly spread, influencing other disciplines and helping to “facilitate interdisciplinary inquiry that offer[ed] a richer, more contextualized understanding of human experience, social relations, and the production of culture,” according to geographer Barney Warf and Latin American colonial literature and culture scholar Santa Arias (Warf and Arias, 2009). The spatial turn brought disciplines into conversation with each other, and it also served as a prism for parsing out disciplinary perspectives. Spatiality, then, served as a “vehicle for examining what it mean[t] to be interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, to cross the borders and divides that . . . organized the academic division of labor” (Warf and Arias, 2009).

The spatial turn had the most profound effects on researchers who studied colonial and postcolonial planning. These scholars interrogated the historical relationship between authority and built form, between politics and spatiality. Planning history could be understood as one part of the work of “technician[s] of general ideas,” to borrow from anthropologist Paul Rabinow. In this frame, planners developed expertise through the exercise of “social technologies of pacification” within the “social laboratories” of cities (Rabinow, 1989). Plans could be seen as a process of visualization—of a “strategic [appeal] to hegemonic images of modernity and discourses of social engineering . . . to restructure the local urban scene” (Ghannam, 1998; Ghannam, 2002). Scholars from a wide array of disciplines converged in their discussions of planning as an exercise of power—whether in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, North Africa, or South Asia—an exercise that was incompletely realized, with persistent “social orders” that, as Simone said, were “denied official recognition and . . . usually misinterpreted as ‘traditional,’ ‘irregular,’ or ‘spontaneous’” (Abu-Lughod, 1980; Mabogunje, 1990; King, 1991; Wright, 1991; Yeoh, 1996; Çelik, 1997; Simone, 2004; Njoh, 2007). In other words, planning was not a historical fact, but rather a vehicle by which government actors asserted their worldview (including their desired power relations). If planning historians simply wrote histories of state of plans without consideration of this larger context of struggle, they would be erasing nonstate actors from their narratives, diminishing the importance and legitimacy of nonstate planning with words like “spontaneous,” “irregular,” “fringe,” and “informal.” Many favelas had organized social relations and systems to distribute resources, for instance, but city planners viewed these spaces as “unplanned,” and eventually, “informal.” Planning historians needed to grapple with the complexity of these relationships, rather than accepting the state’s view wholesale and narrating state planning history separate from other forms of very real—but not state-determined—planning.

Ultimately, then, this rich body of colonial and postcolonial studies challenged the very framework of planning history. Scholars like architect, planner, and historian Jyoti Hosagrahar did not propose a more inclusive or expansive celebration of “minority discourses and knowledges in order to include them in their subordinate positions;” rather, she “question[ed] the very master
narrative” of modernity—a narrative that served normative purposes and that served particular agendas (Hosagrahar, 2005). While Hosagrahar focused more on the construction of modernity, the same move could be applied to planning and planning history broadly. Writing a history positing some urban changes as “planned” and others as “unplanned” reifies the state’s authority, legitimizing some urban imaginaries and delegitimizing others. Put another way, and borrowing this time from Abidin Kusno, an understanding of empire might present urban space not only as a site of oppression, domination, and silencing, but also as “the site of identity formation and an arena for the production of new social and political consciousness”—as a place where new subjectivities came to be (Kusno, 2010). In this context, scholars faced two choices. They could expand their definition of plans and planning to think critically about their nature: to scrutinize state planning of urban space, yes, and also to consider the deliberate remaking and use of city space by urbanites as a type of planning, and to reconsider the automatic authority that historians grant to bureaucratic government planning bodies. Alternately, scholars could reject this critical treatment of the category of “planning,” and restrict the nomenclature of “planning history” to those imaginaries generated by the state, accepting in the process the state’s definitions of “planned” and “unplanned.” In other words, the lack of a coherent field of planning history is due at least in part to an intellectual disagreement about where to draw lines in such wide-ranging interdisciplinary inquiry.

Scholars interested in governmentality have chosen the latter of the two options, treating planning as an instrument of the state, as a part of a state’s assertion of authority. Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott’s ideas about urban order and development proved enormously influential as way of thinking specifically about the apparatus of planning. States not only articulated power but actually gained it through planning and through the creation of new, managed categories (Scott, 1998). Political scientist Timothy Mitchell built on these ideas, observing the role of Egyptian planners in resident participation in village design: in Cairo, planners believed that “the very process of planning would be the means for [villagers] to recover their lost individuality . . . through developing their power to make decisions. They would develop into subjects of the nation” (Mitchell, 2002). Social anthropologist Richard Baxstrom’s study of planning history in Brickfields illustrated this same emphasis on process and meaning by examining not the planned destruction and “redevelopment,” nor even the resistance to these plans, but rather the way “belief itself came to be a defining factor in the creation of ethical subjects and spaces of living in urban Malaysia” (Baxstrom, 2008). US historians and American Studies scholars, meanwhile, wrote new narratives about the creation of poverty and community participation as managerial techniques of the state (Goldstein, 2012; Immerwahr, 2015).

Interdisciplinarity played a key part in the development of this research. Scholars clearly read across disciplinary lines and built on shared research questions to think of planning and plans in a more richly textured way. In fact, one might think of the ever-growing scholarship on place and space as a way to see this challenge to top-down planning and reconceptualize politics (Dikeç, 2012). When dissecting spatial histories of power and meaning, a range of disciplinary tools provided different ways to understand social meaning, contested power relations, the role of the state, and the geography of modernization. Theory also provided common ground. Concepts of space and place have benefited from rigorous debate amongst geographers and amongst historians of science, but the concepts themselves have been “differently expressed” within each group. Geographer Charles Withers argued there was “value in looking at these different views in order to understand that whilst place is a commonplace term it is not agreed upon: working with imprecision has been both opportunity and restriction” (Withers, 2009).

Debates over definition point to a very basic problem with planning history as a coherent field; how, after all, could boundaries be set for planning history if scholars did not agree on a
definition of planning itself? Many of the individuals very explicitly writing and talking about plans and planning did not identify as “planning historians.” This challenge, of course, lends an air of artificiality to any attempt to write a coherent, cohesive, intellectual, and historiographical account of “planning history” as a single thing. Should a survey of planning history be limited to those studies revealing planning as a regulatory or managerial activity with very specific state-controlled agendas? Should planning history analyze grassroots community builders, favela leaders, and informal settlers on the same terms and with the same definitions and analytical frameworks as with state planning? If yes, many informal settlements might be labeled unplanned spaces, in direct contradiction to those scholars arguing for the importance of community planning.

These sorts of questions have had profound implications for urban planners, and one of the most direct challenges to the traditions of planning history came from Leonie Sandercock, an urban planner with training in history and urban research. At the turn of the 21st century, Sandercock decried the limited definition of planning history as a narrative about the rise of the profession and its related objective of city building. Planning historians systematically excluded other narratives by the very act of definition. If instead planning historians defined planning as “community building,” Sandercock argued, they might produce less heroic stories and a broader understanding of planning that accounted for multiple sources of knowledge and action. According to Sandercock, such nascent “insurgent planning histories” had already begun to be written, “challeng[ing] our very definition of what constitutes planning.” For Sandercock, this insurgency was the result of a more explicitly cross-disciplinary effort—presumably because scholars could not so readily find subaltern perspectives in professional and state archives (Sandercock, 1998). Some scholars responded that the simple addition of “unplanned” spaces into planning history might not necessarily transform the frame, however. Stephen V. Ward, Robert Freestone, and Christopher Silver argued that even active inclusion of non-Western historical perspectives might be “unconsciously muted by being developed and expressed through these more traditional channels” (Ward, Freestone, and Silver, 2011).

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Transnational Planning

Interdisciplinarity, then, played a foundational and ongoing role in the debates that sprung up around definitions of the field of planning history. Interdisciplinarity also helped break apart (at least conceptually) the commitment to national boundaries: for some planning historians, the undeniable movement of professional planners and planning ideas served as the first step to more transnational planning histories. Whether in infrastructural improvements, singular concepts like the Garden City, or regulatory techniques like zoning, itinerant planners exchanged ideas and advice in what would become a web of global, intellectual urban networks. In tracking and narrating the work of such footloose planners, planning historians followed suit: geographer and town planner Peter Hall produced what would become a classic of planning history in 1988, explicitly prioritizing the flow of ideas (by Hall’s own title, an “intellectual history”), while also connecting ideas with processes of transplantation and a close scrutiny of physical, built urbanism—arguably, architectural and social histories with clear connections to planning and design (Hall, 1988). This last element distinguished Hall’s work from comparable transnational studies like Dan Rodgers’ Atlantic Crossings, a weighty history of North Atlantic progressivism. That work included planners and architects like Raymond Unwin, Georges Haussmann, and Daniel Burnham, but viewed planning history more through the lens of social politics (Rodgers, 1996). Practical conditions put limits on these intellectual approaches to transnational planning history, with many planning historians favoring research in a select few, mostly Western European languages, with a smaller but significant inclusion of Japanese texts.
Other planning historians drew from a different interdisciplinary well. In thinking about transnationality through the lens of interdisciplinary approaches to power, scholars like Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait put forward the idea that “planning and architectural discourse can be shaped by domestic realities . . . as much as by the experience of professional planners,” that non-planning or non-implementation could be the result of local choice, of local planning, and that planning was a “complex dialectic between center and periphery” (Nasr and Volait, 2003). Returning to earlier themes, then, but from a slightly different direction, Nasr and Volait brought the methods of colonial and postcolonial studies into conversation with non-colonial urban settings and with the study of the built environment generally.

These various influential writings exerted considerable stimulus for a growing body of transnational, international, and global studies of urban renewal, town planning exhibitions, modern mass housing, and various itinerant architects and planners. The result was a growing body of non-national planning histories that freely mixed architecture, history, and planning (Ethington et al., 2009; Urban, 2011; Klemek, 2011; Stanek and Avermaete, 2012; Shoshkes, 2013; Kwak, 2015). The new and growing subfield of transnational planning histories employed a unique mix of disciplinary methods, blending architectural theory, planning, and history without much methodological comment.

Without doubt, however, transnational planning history was at its very core an interdisciplinary project. Shane Ewen declared transnational urban and planning history an interdeterminate subject “located at the interstices of multiple disciplines” and a “natural bedfellow for urban historians” interested in the “manifestation and spread of innovative practices, technologies, and a creative class of urban professionals (scientists, engineers, designers, planning consultants)” (Ewen, 2016). Indeed, Ewen is right to observe that many transnational planning histories have thus far kept the definition of planning within the categories of “professionals” and “experts” — albeit, in more expansive ways to include the aforementioned “urban professionals.” Such transnational works have highlighted ever-more interdisciplinary professional associations and organizations like the International Planning History Society (Ewen, 2016).

Comparative transnational studies likewise employed interdisciplinary approaches, with scholars like Lawrence Vale easily crossing national and disciplinary boundaries and drawing from wide-ranging expertise in history, planning, and international relations to write a classic study of the reformulation of modern national identity through the design of national capitals (Vale, 1992). By 2011–2012, Hein’s edited volume on port cities (Hein, 2011) and Vale’s 2012 coedited volume on global planning illustrated how widely accepted interdisciplinary methods had become in planning history, at least among a select international group of scholars pursuing related questions of urban development and planning at the international, comparative, or transnational scales. Jiahwee Chang’s monograph on tropical architecture is simply the most recent example of this sort of interdisciplinarity (Chang, 2016).

**Conclusion**

Without doubt, interdisciplinarity played and continues to play a critical role in defining the field of planning history. Given the challenges presented here, it seems unavoidable that planning historians will have to much more deliberately reconsider the assumptions embedded in the very delineation of planning. Looking at the historiography, it is clear that planning history has gone through a series of changes as a field, beginning with foundational works narrating the formation of a profession and presupposing a coherent set of plans and planners; to a rethinking of the character of planning from ideal types to hotly contested, potentially problematic, and incompletely realized processes; to a challenge of the very terms themselves, with scholars critically examining the way “plans” and
“planning” worked normatively to produce centers and peripheries, sanctioned and unsanctioned spaces. Given this incredibly rich historiography, it is probably insufficient to simply conclude that future planning histories ought to adhere to a definition of plans and planning without more substantively responding to these important challenges.

Related Topics

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Freestone: Writing Planning History in the English-Speaking World
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Kusno: Postcolonial Southeast Asia
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