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The Global Urban History Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces Planning Perspectives readers to the Global Urban History Project (GUHP), a new initiative to support sustained conversations in the field of global urban history that has important implications for international planning history. It situates the project in the context of the long and fruitful relationship between planning history and urban history and argues that the transnational turns each field has taken require even more cross-fertilization. It also lays out the ways GUHP defines global urban history, the concerns that led to the foundation of the Project, and the Project's hopes for relationship with other professional associations in planning and urban history.

KEYWORDS

Global; urban; history; planning; transnational turn; cross-fertilization of fields; Global Urban History Project (GUHP)

A new initiative in global urban history and an opportunity for planning history

Last May, a group of scholars working at the crossroads of urban history and global history invited members of their combined networks to launch of the Global Urban History Project (GUHP). The goals of the Project are to foster sustained conversations in the emerging hybrid field of global urban history, inviting as many participants as possible from around the world and across subfields of urban history, period of specialization, and professional association.

The Project links several pre-existing networks, including the 'Global Cities: Past and Present' network funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Berlin-based network that edits and publishes the *Global Urban History* blog.

Also among its foundational leaders are distinguished scholars of planning history. These include Carola Hein, editor of the International Planning History Society section of *Planning Perspectives* and convener of the IPHS 2016 conference, and Nancy Kwak, editor for the Americas of *Planning Perspectives*. As of November, 2017, over 200 scholars from dozens of different primary professional associations – including but not limited to the major urban history and planning history associations – have signed up as members of GUHP.

Planning history and urban history are two different yet overlapping fields. Their histories and professional agendas are not the same, yet both rely heavily upon each other. Whatever boundary we draw between the two fields must remain as porous as possible in the future.

Cross-fertilization is even more important in an era when both fields are dramatically extending their respective 'global turns'. Planning historians, who emphasize the inherently international profession of planning, were among the first to anticipate the 'transnational' or global turn in urban history more generally by exploring planner's biographies, examining the exchange of planning ideas and policy frameworks. That tradition perhaps goes all the way back to the planner and historian

Lewis Mumford, whose great synthesis, *The City in History* still sets the standard for sweeping syntheses in both international planning history and global urban history, as does the more recent work of the planner and historical geographer Peter Hall. More than a decade before any talk of ‘transnational turns,’ Robert Fishman was writing about the travels of visions for ‘bourgeois utopias’ from London to the rest of the world (1989) and Gwendolyn Wright was tracing the movements of planning ideas from Paris to the colonies in *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (1991). More recently Carola Hein’s early transnational work *A Capital for Europe* has inspired collaborative projects on port cities and the ‘global petroleumscape’. Chris Klemek has written a transatlantic history of the opposition to modernist planning and the embrace of Jane Jacobs; Ellen Shoshke has traced Jacqueline Tyrwhitt’s career across the continents; and Nancy Kwak has written cutting-edge work on the export of American concepts of homeownership.

What can global urban historians do to support that long and fertile tradition in planning history? As I see it, the genius of urban historians more generally is to elaborate the messy conflicts of spatial production, helping to flesh out the often adverse contexts in which planners work. *Global* urban historians stretch the dimensions (and maybe even the messiness) of that mess, by immersing themselves in struggles over the much larger-scale human activities that create and are created by urban spaces, in addition to the relationship between cities and planetary environmental forces. That widened field represents the political realms in which peripatetic planners plied their wares and developed their international followings. It represents the constraints under which they worked as global actors, the envelope they needed to push, the battles they needed to fight.

I think I can speak for the whole organizing team of the GUHP in saying that ongoing connections between global urban historians and transnational planning historians will be a major source of the lifeblood of what we do as a rapidly expanding Project. For that reason, GUHP organizers reached out, even before the founding of the Project, to the conference programme committee of the Society for American City and Regional Planning History (SACRPH) in Cleveland, Ohio. GUHP will hosted a roundtable at the conference to discuss the mission of the Project. We are also especially delighted to note the theme for the International Planning History Society’s (IPHS) July 2018 meeting in Yokohama: ‘Looking at the World History of Planning’. GUHP plans to sponsor several panels at that conference in coordination with the IPHS programme committee.

As the Project embarks on these and other future engagements with planning historians, I think it makes sense to briefly elaborate to readers of *Planning Perspectives* the intellectual concerns that led to the founding of GUHP, starting with our conception of global urban history itself, preceding to the needs we think GUHP will fulfil as a network, and also clarify the Project’s relationship to other associations.

What is global urban history?

GUHP is based on a broad understanding of global urban history as encompassing any effort to think of cities as creations or creators of larger-scale or global historical phenomena. It celebrates the fact that scholars approach the intersection of urban and global history from different directions. Some travel along ‘transnational turns’ in various subfields. Others draw on the concept of networks, looking at urban connections across oceans, between colony and metropole, or along trade routes and supply chains. Still others start with individuals, not only planners, but also officials or activists, who travel between cities and affect the places where they travel or are affected by those places. Others see cities as incubators of historical change with potentially global ramifications, or think of cities in relation to their variably sized hinterlands.

Some scholars of global urban history aim mostly to compare different places. Some projects focus on a single 'hub' city, others on two or more cities, still others on cities across an entire regions or empires; and still others aim to synthesize larger world-historical narratives. Some work as individual researchers, others have produced a growing list of collaborative anthologies.

In short, global urban history, as understood in the GUHP, can comprise a variety of geographical scopes, theoretical inspirations, modes of research, and genres of knowledge production.

Why do we need a GUHP?

Two observations inspired us in creating this initiative. While there are growing numbers of global urban and planning historians, they are usually minority members of existing professional associations in urban history, planning history, architectural history, areas studies, period studies, or global history. The members of the GUHP Board demonstrate this variety: in addition to a strong representation from planning history, our chief professional contacts are in Latin American History, Middle Eastern History, U.S. History, European History, Early-Modern Colonial and Atlantic History, and the History of Empires and Decolonization. Contributors to the Global Urban History blog and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Network Global Cities: Past and Present come from an even wider range of professional homes. As part of signing up, members were also asked to provide information on the conferences they attend most regularly. This information confirms that scholarship in global urban history is widely dispersed, not only across the most important urban history and global history associations, but also in architecture and art history, geography, area studies, and period studies associations among several dozen others.

The second observation that guided this project is that global urban historians face research challenges unique to the hybrid nature of their field that require sustained training or re-training as well as wider networks of collaboration and inspiration. Often, scholars in global urban history encounter, for instance, a need to combine dense archival research on specific localities in the traditional manner of urban historians while also substantiating claims about phenomena that operate on a variety of larger and longer scales, including the world as a whole and from pre-modern times to the present. Global urban historians also have to engage with a variety of rapidly growing historiographies in addition to urban and global history, ranging from the history of capitalism to the history of migration. At the same time, they are confronted with the need for direct and insistent interrogations of Eurocentrism, US-centrism, and other potentially problematic stories of exceptionalism in urban history, including those involving the very definitions of the urban. Last but not least, scholars in global urban history have to critically engage, from the perspective of historians, with decades of highly evolved research and theorizing across the many fields of urban studies pertaining to global cities, globalization, network societies, and 'global urbanization'. These observations illustrate some of the specific challenges that scholars in global urban history face. We are convinced that coming together in the GUHP will not only help in identifying these challenges, but also in finding ways to tackle them effectively.

What is GUHP's relationship to existing professional associations?

GUHP is based on the idea that the field of global urban history presents its own challenges and requires its own organizational structure. Naturally, though, GUHP's main intellectual goals also overlap in fundamental ways not only with planning history but with those of established associations in urban and global history. GUHP sees all of these overlaps as opportunities to create exciting synergies, and is open to pursuing collaborative projects that are fuelled by mutual interest with our colleagues in all of these organizations.

During 2017–2018, GUHP's first full academic year, GUHP will put that collaborative spirit into practice by inviting scholars to meet GUHP members at roundtables or panels and informal open-houses at all four of the major urban studies conferences. In addition to the open-houses at the SACRPH in Cleveland in October and the panels at the Yokohama meeting of IPHS, GUHP has co-sponsored a roundtable at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Sacramento in April with the Urban History Association (UHA), and a roundtable at the European Association for Urban History (EAUH) conference in Rome in August. We hope to continue to enhance the offerings of these conferences in the future, and hopefully draw GUHP members to these established conferences from its own diversity of associational and geographic bases.

GUHP sees the IPHS as its closest cousin, mentor, and model, as a conference-organizing association that meets in many parts of the world and seeks as wide a geographic membership as possible. Planning historians are thus especially encouraged to join GUHP as one part of their commitment to their field and help us encourage whatever cross-associational activities that might arise within our areas of mutual interest.

Why a 'Project' and not an association?

One last clarification: As a 'Project' rather than as an association, GUHP is devoted not only to fostering sustained conversations but also to the generation of specific Project-authored products. As a first step towards its goal, the Project organizing team asked participants to provide citations of their work in the field. Based on those citations, the GUHP Board will oversee the creation of an online bibliographic database of work in the field, including works in progress. Links will allow members to quickly find published resources on a variety of topics with the field. To add your citations to this tool, become a member of GUHP at the website: globalurbanhistory.org.

GUHP's ongoing and foundational relationship with the *Global Urban History* blog is another of the project's main products. The blog editors provide updates on new books and conduct on-line conversations in the field. Planning historians can follow the blog at globalurbanhistory.com. Also, GUHP now publishes a biweekly series called 'Noteworthy in Global Urban History' to members and prospective members. This series aims to introduce scholars from different parts of the world and different professional homes who may not know each other's work.

In upcoming years, GUHP envisions a series of specialized themed conferences that will meet in different regions of the world, thus hopefully enabling truly global participation. These conferences will be devoted to assembling publishable contributions in a future Project-edited series.

Anyone who is interested in devoting time and energy to organizing future events should visit GUHP's website at globalurbanhistory.org to become a member (it is currently free of charge) and follow further instructions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Carl Nightingale is Professor of Urban History and Global History at the University at Buffalo (State University of New York) and the Coordinator of the new Global Urban History Project. He is the author of *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago, 2012) which was co-winner of the Jerry Bentley Prize in World History.