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# Questioning planning history

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### Abstract

This paper is a personal view of gaps in how planning history is dealt with (not in terms of the quality of its products). Although planning history has generated an international society and two refereed international journals, the vast majority of what is published under the banner of planning history seems to have several potential problems that are explored in this paper. First, this is a very broad discipline, and it is not always clear when work is planning history, or various branches of geography, history, architecture etc. Is this loose categorisation an asset or a hindrance? Secondly, the bulk of publications deal scarcely if at all with some fundamental philosophical and theoretical issues that are now only too familiar in mainstream history. Exploring these can help to focus and develop rigour in planning history.

*Key words: planning history, theory and practice of history*

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# Questioning planning history

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“The landscape we see is not a static arrangement of objects. It has become what it is, and it is usually in the process of becoming something different” (Darby, 1953, p. 7).

## Introduction

This quotation from the historical geographer H.C. Darby succinctly summarises an important point about landscapes: they change. How and why landscapes, particularly urban ones, change is often studied in terms of “planning history”; and it is significant that Darby’s comment appeared in a paper ‘On the relations of geography and history’. The present paper is an introductory exploration of some important issues in history and in planning history in terms of my own understanding and research: the relationships between disciplines, some principles of that research, and the specifics of one aspect of it. It is unashamedly a personal view (in the tradition of the “sermon” on the use of urban history by Tilly, 1996), and reflects the author’s two-decade-long involvement in planning history.

## Which discipline?

Planning history is, it seems, a broad church. It either encompasses many diverse disciplines, or straddles – perhaps uncomfortably – the boundaries of those disciplines. As the UK academic world enters another research assessment exercise, with its tendency to squeeze us into disciplinary boxes, and its urge to declare specialist focus, it seems appropriate to question these boundaries.

So how do others view what I do – for my perception is that my work has not changed disciplinary direction over the past two decades. Is it historical geography? The first book I edited, with Jeremy Whitehand (Whitehand and Larkham, 1992), was described as “a first class piece of British urban historical geography” (Ashworth, 1993, p. 236). Yet what we do has great similarities to work such as Domosh’s on New York and Boston (Domosh, 1996). Put simply, she focused on the question ‘why do cities look the way they do?’ But that was called “a stimulating example of the ‘new’ cultural geography” (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, undated). These comments suggest that what I do is of interest in a range of subject areas related to urban form, history, geography and planning. Yet it seems worth exploring whether these are issues of inter-disciplinary, intra-disciplinary, or trans-disciplinary interest. Am I sitting on fences? Are these boundaries or barriers?

I have also been described as “a well-known planning historian” and, perhaps a significant difference, a “revisionist historian” (Ward, 2007; Gold, 2008). Worryingly, though, my Oxford dictionary defines “revisionist” in the light of Marxist-Leninist

doctrine! And most uses of the term are pejorative:<sup>1</sup> the revisionist perspective is “revolting” (Anon., 1979); President Bush is disdainful of revisionist historians of the current Iraq conflict (Anon., 2003); and the most common use of the term refers to Holocaust deniers such as David Irving (Evans, 2001). “Most revisionist historians are ... untrained and emotionally unbalanced attention-seekers” (Hilton, 2003). But, surely, it is the task of all historians, of whatever discipline or period, to “revise”? It is, perhaps, a truism that “History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten” (Santanya, 1905-6, book 5).

### **Sutcliffe’s planning history**

In thinking about the place and nature of planning history it seemed appropriate to revisit a journal editorial written a quarter-century ago by that eminent planning historian Tony Sutcliffe (1981, pp. 65-67). He noted that “planning history has been around as long as planning”, but that there was “a new wave of self-conscious planning history which has welled up since the early 1970s”. But was this a worrying trend? “Does it not reflect the rejection of a once-proud elite of technocrats, who take refuge in the past from an uncertain present and a gloomy future?” (Sutcliffe, 1981, p. 65).

Part of Sutcliffe’s argument was an exploration of what planning does in relation to long-term economic cycles – planning, as with construction and all else, is subject to Kondratiev waves. In the up-swings “planning is ambitious, innovative, exciting to execute”. The period 1945-1970 was an up-swing: this is the period of post-war reconstruction; the “brave new world” of new city centres and New Towns. In the down-swings “planning disappoints in the execution, but breeds a new generation of ideologies and creative artists who prepare for the next growth phase” (Sutcliffe, 1981, p. 65). The inter-war period was a down-swing, as was the period from 1970 to when Sutcliffe wrote. In this latter down-swing, as a reaction to the destruction of war and boom, the counter-movement of conservationism became prominent. We should now be in another up-swing; and indeed in the UK we have a new planning ideology: “spatial planning” is taking over, and the issue of “sustainability” permeates all.<sup>2</sup> Yet there seems little evidence of another new wave of planning history.

Sutcliffe’s place for planning history and historians was as “unsettling persons”, evaluating and questioning the past, soberly assessing its “contribution to the long-term development of planning methodology” (Sutcliffe, 1981, p. 67; referring to Breheny and Batey, 1981). Planning history should replace myth in situating ideas within a broad and long-term historical perspective.

The *development* of planning methodology *per se* seems to have been relatively little-studied by planning historians; although there are studies of legislation and ideas (see, for example, Delafons, 1997, on conservation; Cullingworth, 1999, on the

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<sup>1</sup> However, see the suggestion that “the trick of being a successful historian is to become known as a Revisionist Historian. This is a well worn procedure. The ambitious historian should take any accepted viewpoint in existing history writing and give it another slant ... Set the cat among the pigeons and thereby establish the new orthodoxy” (Gordon, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> For UK spatial planning see the 2004 Planning and Compensation Act and papers in *Planning Practice and Research* vol. 22 no. 1 (2007); the overall ethos is given in Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005). But the actions of the 2010 Coalition government suggest that the vision of spatial planning has not been seen by those who now govern.

1947 Act), these are hardly methodological. And myth is important. There is a significant body of work exploring myths in the creation of past urban landscapes, including Slater (1987) on ideal and reality in medieval town layout, Lilley (1999) on the medieval ideal and its use in twentieth-century planning, and Whitehand and Carr (1999) on the myths of the twentieth-century inter-war suburb. But does this highlighting of myth, this ‘learning lessons from the past’, really facilitate what Read (1981, p. 68) calls the “goal of historical and cultural continuity [which] will only be achieved by building on the entire historical experience of the city”?

For Read and others have suggested that one focus for planning history is to counter the loss of cultural continuity, the sense of dislocation, that urban and societal change can bring. Inevitably, he suggests, lay and professional people perhaps look back to an idealised past, perhaps mythical rather than real. Even Raymond Unwin’s progressive planning evoked an idealised, sanitised, world of village life (Unwin, 1909). Today one might say similar things about New Urbanism. Culot has uncompromisingly called for “imitation – and I mean imitation not interpretation – of pre-industrial architectural and urban culture” (Culot, 1980: Read’s translation). Yet this runs counter to exhortations in architecture and planning about looking *forward*.

But this should be questioned. First, this appeal is perhaps simplistic. Writing of the early urban social reformers, Read suggested that “the problems encountered by the reformers are now themselves a part of the historical and cultural experience of cities, and they must be acknowledged of the appeal to history is not simply to allow those problems to recur” (Read, 1981, p. 69). It also seems too close to the oft-quoted statement that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1905-6, Book 1).<sup>3</sup> There seems little evidence that planning history *per se* is quite this cyclic.

Secondly, this revision is only useful if it is read – or even taught. The citations to much of this work in planning history and related areas such as urban morphology are quite restricted. These are small groups, composed very largely of academics, who tend to cite each other. There have been criticisms of academic historians and planning historians and the lack of relevance to current issues.<sup>4</sup> Relevance to today’s professional concerns, though many of us strive to make such links, is rarely seen by today’s professionals. In part they do not read what we write, because our pressure is still to write almost wholly for a research assessment-driven academic readership increasingly structured to respond to research assessment exercises. In part, talking to professionals clearly demonstrates that they simply do not have time to read what we write, wherever we publish it, because the day-to-day pressures of the job are intense. And, most recently, the strong push towards shorter, “intensive”, planning courses in the UK appears to have minimised any real historical dimension in the taught curriculum. Even so it was encouraging when the Royal Town Planning Institute’s then Director of Policy and Research exhorted us to look to the past (MacDonald, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> The appeal of Santayana’s well-known comment for the historical period on which I have worked is in its well-known use as the epigraph to William Shirer’s *Rise and fall of the Third Reich* (1960).

<sup>4</sup> Are academic historians, “as can be their wont, ... creating a new specialism with a view to securing their own future employment?” (Sutcliffe, 1981, p. 65); while Campbell (2005, p. 235) caricatures “The life of the historian academic [which] may appear to those outside universities as one of privilege, involving an endless round of conferences to distant lands to give papers on topics, which if they are interpretable into everyday language are at best tangential to societal needs, with the odd lecture the only disruption to this whirl of academic discourse”.

## Historians on history

“All history is the history of thought” (Collingwood, 1946).<sup>5</sup>

Having said all this, perhaps some consideration of how historians have viewed the discipline and practise of history might be instructive. There are problems in the nature of ‘historical facts’, the nature and use of theory and interpretation, and thus whether historians are ever ‘objective’. Some historians have long thought deeply, although with little evident agreement, about these issues:<sup>6</sup> to a point where Fogel and Elton commented that either historians

“ignore the philosophers and get on with what they are doing, but that might mean that they continue to work without understanding how they are doing it. Or they down tools to listen to the philosophers, but this will most likely mean that tools will stay permanently downed” (Fogel and Elton, 1983, p. 2).

First, is there a need for “theory”? In teaching, especially at postgraduate level, we always highlight the imperative need for theory. Even planning is now so theory-conscious that it has at least two journals of planning theory. “History must have a theory”, stated the Marxist historian John Tosh (1984, chapter 8).<sup>7</sup> Evans (1987, p. 83) argues that theory “of whatever kind” is vital, for it is what allows “a reading of documentary material in a way that cuts across or runs counter to the purposes of the people who wrote it”. Others disagree. Marwick (2001, p. 108), for example, notes that many theories (he was referring specifically to Tosh’s Marxism) “demonstrably get so many things wrong”, and so “historians should be reflexive and articulate about their assumptions and methods, opening their confidence to readers, rather than battering them with authoritarian pronouncements”.

However, inevitably the “theory” is a product of the historian’s time, not of the time being researched or at which documentation was produced. Raphael Samuel (1992, p. 233) suggested that “the whole art of historical research, in many cases, is to *detach* documents from the ‘discourse’ of which they formed a part and juxtapose them with qualitatively different others”. It is this detachment that allows different historians to arrive at different evaluations of sources, hence “revisionism”.

Next, what about “facts” and their collection? Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1904 to G.O. Trevelyan (father of the British historian G.M. Trevelyan) bemoaning the “noxious belief that research is all, that accumulation of facts is everything, and the ideal history of the future will consist not even of the work of one huge pedant but of a multitude of small pedants...” (Letter of 25 January 1904 quoted by Marwick, 2001, pp. 85-6). Historians had been taught to “get at the real facts” (as Davies [1987, p. 3] said of American historians of the early post-war period).<sup>8</sup> More recently Evans (1997, p. 48) reinforced the view that there are still “many new things to discover” in the study of history, and suggests that “the majority of working historians probably

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<sup>5</sup> Collingwood’s words are elaborated by Carr (1987); and see Evans (1997, p. 91).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on this is huge. Classic examples include Collingwood, 1946; Elton, 1967; Carr, 1987; and Evans, 1997; see also the acerbically-annotated bibliography in Marwick, 2001. All have been used, albeit superficially, in the preparation of this section. Most have generated a considerable volume of critical rejoinders.

<sup>7</sup> Tosh did modify this dogmatic statement in subsequent editions (see also 2nd edn, 1991; 3rd edn, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Marwick (2001), never one to mince his words, notes that this statement is “one of the most astonishing statements I have ever read from a historian” (p. 154) and “how appallingly badly she, and the other students, were taught!” (p. 139).

consider that adding to our knowledge of the past – ‘filling in a gap’ – is just as important as transforming our understanding of what is already known, if not more so”.

Carr (1987, p. 12) suggested that an event in the past did not become a “fact” until it was accepted as such by historians. Therefore a “fact” did not exist independent of the theoretical perspective and interpretation of the historian and, by implication, the readers/users of history. “Fact” is thus not “evidence” until the historian applies theory and interpretation (Evans, 1997, p. 200). Another view might be that the “facts” of history are “constructed artifacts no different in cognitive origin than any made thing or ‘fiction’” (Partner, 1995, p. 23). Hence “interpretation does not begin *after* the facts are gathered; interpretation *creates* the evidence and the facts” (Somekawa and Smith, 1988, p.152, my emphasis).

Elton strongly disagreed, suggesting instead that a “fact” was simply something that had happened in the past, leaving traces (Elton said “in documents”) which could be used by historians in the present (Elton, 1967, see pp. 27, 65). But such facts should be seen in the context of the day that produced it.<sup>9</sup> Evans felt that both views needed modification: historians are rarely interested in facts for their own sake, but are usually concerned with the “interconnectedness” of facts (Evans [1997, p. 200] credits Leopold von Ranke with this term, but with no source). Marwick, too, suggests that historians should “not find ‘facts’ but a whole range of nuances, conditions, states of mind, interconnections, and so on” (Marwick, 2001, p. 139).

And is there more to history than “the true facts”? Marks suggests that there is: “truth and completeness do not simply mean internal consistency and adherence to facts but also mean comprehensiveness – the ability to include a broad range of facts and ideas within an historical account” (Marks, 1979, p. 507). Marwick (2001, p. 152) highlights the futility of seeking “the facts”: reiterating that we should study the interconnectedness, looking at a wide range of sources and seeking corroboration, qualification and correction. The *nature* of sources is important [46].<sup>10</sup> For example, after Lyotard, there are state-sanctioned ‘master narratives’ based on the ‘facts’ as contained in official sources and claiming objective historical truth, and the ‘local narratives’, forms of resistance often counter to the state’s version, laying no claim to omniscience or universal validity, and probably subjective (Bennington, 1988). This is the theory and interpretation of (one version of) postmodernism.

Then there are the various waves – or fashions, or ideologies – in history. Marwick is positive that we should not call these “paradigms”– Kuhn’s frequently-cited work was on *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962), and Marwick notes dismissively that “there was a time when the history of science tended to be written by scientists themselves, which meant that the history was rather naive”, and that “to put the matter politely, [Kuhn] was received more enthusiastically by sociologists than by scientists. Historians certainly are not obliged to accept its formulaic and broadly relativist approach” (Marwick, 2001, p. 133; see also Evans, 1997, pp. 42-43). Others have written on the development of the field in terms very familiar from other disciplines more associated with Kuhn: Carr (1987, p. 9), for example, writes of the positivist approach to science as history, and its “cult of facts”; and both Evans

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<sup>9</sup> Tosh (1984, p. 236) suggested that the Carr-Elton disagreement was “the best starting point for the debate about the standing of historical knowledge”.

<sup>10</sup> Although Jordanova (2000, p. 186) writes scathingly of “the cult of the archive” and Carr (1987, see chapter 1) of a “fetishism of documents”, Marwick (2001, chapter 5) insists that understanding, using appropriately and reporting accurately the nature of sources consulted is a crucial attribute of the historian’s craft.

(1997) and Marwick (2001) are critical of the search for a “scientific approach” to history. Even so, in looking at Marwick’s review of the history of history, one could paraphrase Kuhn that old paradigms don’t die out, it’s just their adherents that do so.<sup>11</sup>

For me, the notion of two of the new ‘waves’ is interesting. First is the “new social history” (new in the 1960s), and tending to explore concepts such as ‘ideology’, ‘hegemony’ and ‘social control’. It highlights issues of the everyday rather than of the élite. But it is criticised for its strong political motivations – as being in effect a new *socialist* history. British social history developed, as a sub-field, “an almost evangelical enthusiasm for oral history” (Marwick, 2001, p. 135). Such recollections can be a rich source of information not found elsewhere, but recollecting across half a century or more has its problems. It has been suggested that history in general has a broader social concern: “historians could be accused of wanting to know only about ‘the great deeds of kings’, but today this is certainly no longer true. More and more they are turning toward what their predecessors passed over in silence, discarded or simply ignored” (Ginzburg, 1980, p. xiii).

Likewise I find the notion of a “new cultural history” (new in the 1970s and 1980s) intriguing. Culture, Marwick (2001, p. 136) notes critically, “is used in such a confused, and confusing, variety of ways that one almost feels it should be struck from the serious historian’s vocabulary”, and others have suggested alternatives such as “anthropological history” or “ethnographic history” (Darnton, 1984, p. 11). It is held to “combine social and cultural modes of analysis in an empirically concrete yet theoretically informed fashion ... The concept of culture is understood here in the broadest sense, to encompass the ideology, symbols and rituals, and high and popular culture” (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999, p. ix). Marwick (2001, p. 137) supports “the rigorous methods being applied to a great range of previously unused archive material” by cultural historians, although in terms of writing style he says “it is also my conviction that the elaborate citations of Foucault, Geertz and the rest are quite unnecessary”. Some writing “seems to me to say little that a historian who had never heard of Foucault or Geertz could not have arrived at independently” (Marwick, 2001, p. 138). But is this a comment on the concepts and approaches, or on the current academic literary convention with respect to how one has to position oneself with regard to fashionable concepts and authors? Journal referees and editors are, of course, powerful gatekeepers as well as controllers of “quality”.

Within this cultural history has arisen a body of “microhistories”, detailed but very small-scale work illuminating aspects of cultural history. In some contexts this has been used to show how the language used by the protagonists can itself become an instrument of political and social change; and that microhistories “attempt to show not merely what people thought but how they thought – how they *construed* the world”. Darnton (1984, pp. 11, 14) has also noted that he deliberately “abandoned the usual distinction between élite and popular culture”.

A final issue worthy of consideration is how historians construct, and use, narrative. Santayana, though not a historian, suggested that narrative – “story-telling” – was one of the “three parts into which the pursuit of history may be divided” (the other two being investigation and theory) (Santayana, 1905-6, Book 5 chapter 3). One of the

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<sup>11</sup> However, it is clear that some authors do change their attitudes during their careers; the Marxist historians Tosh and Jordanova, for example, “are abandoning their categorical pronouncements, and quietly jettisoning Foucault, Barthes, and White. They can’t beat the ‘empirical’ professional historians, so they want to join us” (Marwick, 2001, p. 268).

most frequently-cited papers in this area is Lucaites and Condit, who explore “the ancient and currently neglected rhetorical conception of narration ... as a means of highlighting the various functions of narrative discourse”, and for them the dialectical narrative is particularly important. A dialectician should “narrate the facts like a *witness* and not an *advocate*” (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, pp. 91, 99, with original emphasis). Topolski (1999) suggests that narrative creation involves logic, but also aesthetics and imagination. Basic information is ‘bound together’ to form a narrative, incorporating an aesthetic sense of structure or order.

“This production of narrative, a necessarily inventive activity, cannot be separated out from history as if it were an inessential element or an artistic flourish; it rebounds on the very nature of the historical enterprise and it calls into question the whole concept of historical truth ... writing history is a political and creative process, consisting of piecing together a narrative from chosen fragments of the past” (Somekawa and Smith, 1988, p. 153).

And the influence of Hayden White (for example White, 1984) can be seen in what Evans (1997, p. 126) describes as the “growing awareness on the part of historians of the literary and narrative elements in their own work – research as well as writing – and that, surely, is no bad thing”.

Although there is a weighty literature within history dealing with all of these issues, it should not be thought that all historians take account of all – or indeed any – of them. “Historians have largely resisted following up on the disturbing implications of these theories; rather than recasting the way many historians practice their craft, historical theory has been relegated to another specialized field” (Somekawa and Smith, 1988, p. 150).

### **Relationship with *planning* history and urban form**

Most of this debate, perhaps basic or even *passé* to historians, seems to be foreign to most planning historians, and to others such as urban morphologists with a historical focus on urban form. With a few exceptions (such as those exploring medieval urban planning) we have looked at the relatively recent past, principally that of the industrial period. My own work has focused on the post-1940 period. We are, therefore, fortunate in the diversity of primary and secondary sources available. Even so, archives of even this recent period are patchy. Some material is still not available in local or national archives, being retained by the relevant departments; and there has been great selectivity in the files made available in the National Archives (some being marked “sample retained for historical purposes”).

Yet many researchers have clearly sought “true facts” or “new facts” amidst this mass of source material. Some have found new sources, such as the work by Voldman (1990) in France, Hubbard *et al.* (2003) in Coventry and Adams (2011) on Birmingham, on oral histories of the post-war reconstruction period. There are some attempts to engage with Darnton’s (1984) comment on microhistories: “attempt[ing] to show not merely what people thought but how they thought – how they *construed* the world”, especially through exploring the language of planning documentation and texts. Gold’s work on architectural and urban modernism, informed by detailed interviews, also helps to understand *why* people thought in a particular way (Gold, 1997, 2007; though note the recent commentary on interviewing by Proctor, 2006).

But much planning history has shown a preoccupation with the “great plans” of the “great planners”; and inevitably virtually all of the latter were white, middle class and

male. "This idolatry transforms planning history into a virtual epic where these white males become the heroes of planning and urban development" (Shipp, 1989, p. 278). This focus is certainly true of the post-war reconstruction, where many traditional planning histories imply that a handful of planners restructured the whole country. Of Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie, for example, a contemporary journal noted that "It rather looks as though future generations may be able to say, in paraphrase of Mark Twain's conclusion as to Michaelangelo's activities in Italy: 'God re-made Britain from the designs of Professor Abercrombie'" (*Architect & Building News*, 1943). Numerous papers have focused on Abercrombie and his plans (for example Dix, 1981; Cherry, 1989; Higgott, 1991-2; Hall, 1995; Jones, 1998; Lambert, 2000; Essex and Brayshay, 2005). Apart from further illustrating his high-profile role, why? After all, a key source, his own papers, has yet to be fully explored in print (they are currently held by Professor G. Dix).

Leonie Sandercock is an exceptionally rare counter to this very traditional and élite construction of history. She sees mainstream planning history as being "the official story" – and this is inevitably partial, sanitised, biased. In her edited volume *Making the invisible visible: a multicultural planning history* she and her authors seek to represent the "silent and neglected voices" of planning (Sandercock, 1998). Hero worship (mostly written by white middle-class males, it has to be said) has obscured the noteworthy planning achievements of others, especially of minority groups. There are, or perhaps more accurately *should be*, a multitude of planning histories: the viewpoints of many more individuals and groups should be heard. This collection highlights some of these groups, and authors use a wide range of approaches and theoretical perspectives to do so. Interestingly there are issues with this perspective, as has been said about "radical" history in terms of the nature of historical 'truth': "we have claimed to be digging up the buried past, to be telling a heretofore hidden truth about oppressed peoples, to be uncovering a different side to the story. What shall we do if we can no longer claim truth, the whole story, the big picture, as our justification?" (Somekawa and Smith, 1988, p. 151). Further, in the light of my earlier remarks on disciplinary boundaries, insecurity and identity, it is interesting to note that this avowed book on planning history was published as the second in the series California Studies in Critical Human Geography.

More recently Sandercock (2003) has explored the use of "story" in planning; although not specifically a planning *history* (save of the very recent examples she cites) this unusual consideration of "planning as performed story" does link to the use of narrative in history].

There are other studies of recent urban change that are relevant in that they take very different approaches, but whether they could be considered "planning history" is questionable. First, there are the critical, and more personal, accounts such as Mike Davis's *City of quartz* (1990) and Elizabeth Wilson's *Sphinx in the city* (1991). These are certainly often-cited in commentaries on the development of ideas *about* planning and cities. Secondly, one could consider urban morphological studies. Whitehand, for example, has explored examples of the history of UK urban change in great detail using planning records (and has spurred a body of work focusing on urban form through the agents and agencies involved in its creation and change) (Whitehand, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992; Whitehand and Whitehand, 1984).

Indeed, exploring the social dimensions of planning and the changing built environment has strong resonance for British geographical urban morphologists. For M.R.G. Conzen, the urban landscape itself is a social phenomenon. It is "a stage on which successive societies work out their lives, each society learning from, and working to some extent within the framework provided by, the experiments of its

predecessors” (Whitehand, 1981, p. 143). It is the “objectivation of the spirit of a society” (Conzen, 1966, p. 58). Exploring the social production of the built environment is often a matter of investigating the multiplicity of actions of everyday individuals, not of the “great deeds”.

My own research is primarily in planning history and urban form. Reflecting on a couple of decades’ output I can see many of the issues – shortcomings – criticised above. First, I too have explored the “great plans” of some of the “great (reconstruction) planners”. Thomas Sharp is a tempting target because it was one of his well-produced, still readily-available city plans that first spurred my interest in this topic. However, like so many, I have particularly focused on that most eminent and prolific planner, Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie (Larkham, 2004a). Yet I have done so with the experience of jointly compiling a bibliography of reconstruction plans which clearly shows the majority of reconstruction plans were written by local officers or individuals, not the eminent and expensive consultants (Larkham and Lilley, 2001). Despite this focus on a “great planner” in the traditional historical mould, I am also influenced by my morphological background to examine aspects of a broad range of the “agents of change” involved in the replanning. This has looked at the “planners” – who come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds – through to the artists used to illustrate many of these plans. Aspects such as their backgrounds, other work, inter-relationships (who worked with whom) have been explored as far as the available sources allow. Further, I have compiled the sketchy surviving snippets on the breadth of agents involved at this time, and on the costs of these plans, from individual archives, surviving contracts, and notices in professional journals (Larkham, 2004b, 2005, 2007a). So I had a slightly different perspective on Abercrombie’s plan for Warwick: a broader view, I think, than many of the ‘traditional’ planning history-writers of this period. Nevertheless, the resulting narratives scarcely touch on Sandercock’s stories or “silent neglected voices”.

I have also studied Birmingham. But was all of the work not done by Tony Sutcliffe and Roger Smith by 1974? Certainly I have found myself treading in their footsteps in reading local archive material. But there is now material from the National Archives to consider, which was unavailable in the late 1960s; and there is further work on the city’s architectural history (Foster, 2005) and so on. And my morphological background leads me to consider the physical urban form itself as a type of evidence. Even so, it is difficult to break away from explicit consideration of a “great planner”: Sir Herbert Manzoni. The received wisdom is that the replanning was his concept; and indeed Sutcliffe and Smith dedicated their civic history to him. What could be said to be different about my reading of this period of the city’s development? (Larkham, 2007b). After all, I have uncovered few “new facts” despite intensive work in archives and a wide range of secondary sources: but this has explored

- the ‘lack of a plan’ in comparison to other places replanning at exactly the same time, both bombed and unbombed;
- the contribution of key individuals, especially Manzoni: considering him as a product of his time and thus whether he should be either credited or blamed for what Birmingham has since become;
- the speed of redevelopment; including the lengthy ‘gestation periods’ of some projects; and
- the overall impact of this period of change on the urban landscape, especially of the CBD.

Looking at what happened in just one city, Birmingham, and noting the lags between idea and construction, the differences between ideal and reality, one is tempted to

paraphrase the Italian typomorphologists Caniggia and Maffei (2001, p. 33) that “Unfortunately the result is a panorama of exasperating individuality ... that is out of date before it is finished”.

However, thus far – in common with much recent planning history – this body of work has not really focused on social issues save for considering the social construction of the education and professional involvement of some of the main players. It has not engaged much with the cultural aspects, either high or low, save for extracting some public reactions to proposals, largely from the letters pages of local newspapers, and in considering the representations of future reconstructed buildings and urban landscapes in artistic terms. It has not explored the involvement or reactions of powerless or minority groups to this process of replanning, although a paper on the professionals’ efforts to “consult” remains unpublished. It certainly does not seek to take, or make explicit, any specific theoretical standpoint. There remain, therefore, many unexplored avenues for further work, and many ways in which revising the reconstruction era could engage more closely with debates on ‘how to do history’.

## **Conclusion**

It is very appropriate to review the creation of this post-war modernist urban landscape, which has been the focus of considerable work over the past 15-20 years, at a point when once-praised buildings are being demolished or radically altered (While, 2006). Is this work “planning history”? Yes, in that it lies firmly within the traditional remit and methods of planning history inquiry, but with added dimensions of urban morphology, and perhaps with more critical consideration of what might still be seen as the main players. It also draws on architecture and architectural history, in terms of assessing the built environment. Broader historical work (national economic history, and indeed business history) contribute a context for the local actions – or inactions. So this is very much an interdisciplinary effort. Planning history could make more of crossing disciplinary boundaries.

Yet is it really ‘history’? It pays little, if any, overt heed to the currents of debate about history; and its reliance on a range of secondary sources, even its use of oral histories, would be reviled by some traditional historians. But “archives” tell us relatively little. Council Minutes are, legally, merely records of decisions, not necessarily notes of debates. Some of the detail of arguments and viewpoints has to come from a wide range of other sources – newspapers, professional magazines, and so on; all of which have well-recognised shortcomings. However, I would say that it is in the wide-ranging identification and collation of such disparate matter that this becomes history; and in the structuring of a logical argument from such material one creates a narrative.

How can the activity of planning history move forward? I am thinking of more than charting what has already been done and identifying the gaps; although, as Miller (1998) shows, some countries are still in need of this basic scholarship. First, if planning history is truly history, it does need to engage more closely with the philosophies, theories and practices of the wider discipline of history. Without an awareness of these issues, planning history could be derided as unduly inward-looking, scarcely developing as a field of serious scholarly inquiry. There could be a greater explicit and critical engagement with the philosophies and methods developed in closely-related disciplines that contribute to planning history and from which many writers of planning history originate. In this piece, for example, I have not been sufficiently critical of the urban morphological perspective on which much of my own work is based.

Secondly, if planning history is truly part of planning, it needs also to engage more closely with the profession. The *value* of knowledge of the past must be communicated clearly to practitioners, politicians and other influential people/groups. Specific *lessons* from the past must be identified and applied to future planning processes and decisions. More generally perhaps, in a period when ‘evidence-based policy’ is a prominent government message, is (some of) the evidence derived from planning history? “Today when we have to implement the brownfield message of the architect-led Urban Task Force, it is salutary to see how our predecessors approached the urban planning needs of their time” (Bancroft, 2001, p. 80). But inevitably we do so through the lens of today’s dominant paradigms, for example the rise of urban design as an adjunct to planning and architecture, let alone the pervasive postmodernism that Marwick seeks to demolish in the context of the study of history. And Marwick also said “distrust [historians] if they claim to have an understanding of the future” (Marwick, 2001). However, surely that is a *sine qua non* of planning, if not of planning historians?

Thirdly, though, are today’s planning historians too cautious, too readily repeating the “great plans, great planners” narrative?<sup>12</sup> “Grand questions” are not being clearly identified and innovatively investigated, or communicated clearly to non-specialists.<sup>13</sup> Outputs seem driven by the conventions of research assessment exercises. Planning history has no equivalent of the televisual Simon Schama or even Mick Aston.<sup>14</sup> Planning historians need to be bold and innovative in what they do and how they do it – and that also extends to the gatekeepers of journal referees and editors.

Fourthly, a biographical, perhaps sociological, perspective could be further developed. This needs to be drawn broadly. There is surely still a place for the *person*: personalities, backgrounds, education, networks and so on may all have significance. But there is need for greater consideration of the “Sandercock alternative”: those individuals and groups affected by planning, whose stories could be elucidated in similar biographical, interview-based ways or via storytelling.

Finally, developing that thought further, the *nature* of the activities investigated by planning historians might be broadened. The International Planning History Society has explicitly focused on the industrial period, and implicitly on the *purposeful* creation of places. But what about – for example – the medieval period, where periods and areas of deliberate “planning” are being recognised? (Slater, 1990). Or piecemeal processes, often called “unplanned”? Is there a planning history of what Banham *et al.* (1969) called “non-plan”? And what about a planning history of traditional vernacular settlements, especially in developing countries? Or would this simply be regarded as generic urban, rather than planning, history? We return to the question of trying to determine whether *planning* history has a distinct character and contribution. Clearly, these comments have just scratched the surface and I hope that they will encourage others to question what we do and how it is done.

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<sup>12</sup> At a “question time” debate on past and future planning (held at this university in September 2007), several UK planners most readily identified Howard and garden cities as their key planning lesson for the future.

<sup>13</sup> Of course this lack of clear communication to non-specialists is far from being unique to planning history, but it is worth noting Henderson’s criticism that “arcane vocabulary and excessive theorizing can have an unintended effect ... they can actually make a discipline less, not more inclusive, since only a select few can understand the language of its practitioners” (Henderson, 1999, p. 224).

<sup>14</sup> With apologies to readers who have not seen the television performances of this North Atlantic historian or archetypal English archaeologist.

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