Book Review for Planning Perspectives

Interurban Knowledge Exchange in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870–1950

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“Understanding history requires a lot more than analyzing what is going on: it presupposes continuous processes of purification and constant efforts to deconstruct views and perceptions that, while often empowering public opinion, contradict historical realities. If this book contributes to the elimination of the notion of the periphery, one of the most persistent distortions, it has done what its authors have hoped for.” This last sentence of the book written by Cor Wagenaar in his “Afterword”, provides indeed a most adequate framing for the collective effort of the book to explain how cities – beyond the major metropolitan centres and major events like universal and international exhibitions – learned from each other in the period around 1900, and to show how seemingly minor and oftentimes frustrated efforts by individuals, embedded within “transnational intellectual relationships”, have pushed urban knowledge and urban development forward. And it – the last sentence of the book – eliminates any doubt that might come up throughout reading whether the book should have had a less descriptive and more provocative title, incorporating, for example, the term “periphery”. No, it should not.

“Interurban knowledge exchange in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870-1950” is an excellent and meticulous collection of particular case studies on a question that, in times of social media, international conferences, fab labs, urban think tanks, international master courses, world urban forums and city alliances, urban specialist encounters, global biennales on architectural and urban matters, twitter accounts run by mayors and specific areas of their cities administrations and constant newspaper reports on best practices, seems easy to be answered and even to be observed, but was not so clearly obvious in the period which the book takes under its lens: how is (or was) urban knowledge exchanged?

The book transfers us back into a period which, in the context of the current pandemic, acquires a new relevance, especially under this umbrella of knowledge transfer: in our highly globalized context of instant proximity, a careful learning from other cities is more than necessary beyond copy-and-paste and the application of labels and slogans of city marketing. This is especially the case among “emerging cities”, commonly defined today as growing economic centres in the Global South and used in the book to define “peripheral” cities like Prague, Berdyansk, Detroit, Milan, Mexico-City, Zagreb, Lviv, Barcelona, Warsaw, Bucharest, Budapest, Breslau or Pilawa. Their efforts made in urban reform, in an atmosphere of an increasing interest in improving living conditions while avoiding other cities’ mistakes when facing and addressing health and hygiene issues in a combined application of specific local knowledge and acquired knowledge through the study of best practices, are transmitted through the 12 chapters of the book in a very timely and inspiring way.

The division of the chapters into three sections, “Networks in urban planning”, “Best practices in public health” and “Cultural infrastructures”, is maybe not entirely convincing, as these key topics overlap and as some chapters fall under more than one section, while others are maybe strangely placed in their specificity, and while the book visualizes multi-layered urban histories. What leads as a central theme through the book is the key role of individuals in this effort of knowledge transfer: individuals with particular scholarly, professional or individual interests, who, as traveling and cosmopolitan figures, engage in collaborations beyond national boundaries. They contribute even to the creation of what the authors call an “interurban matrix”, with regards to sewage systems, zoos or science museums.

The Jewish-German doctor and specialist in construction hygiene Isidor Soyka is presented by Cathleen M. Giustino as a key figure in the transfer of ideas on public health in Prague, while the Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik faces difficulties in the implementation of an integrative urban design around the castle of Prague, in a conflict of interests between modernization and tradition; the
Hungarian architect Géza Maróti contributed to a “regional-universal” architectural style and to the construction of emblematic buildings in Mexico City in its key period of constructing a modern nation, as Eszter Gantner illustrates; the correspondence between Catalan architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch and the Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga challenged the validity of the nation-state as point of departure and influenced, at the same time, the architectural historiography, categorization of styles and definition of heritage in Catalonia and in Romania as a transnational practice, as Lucila Mallart argues.

Whether modernism should be in the service or rather in opposition to a national movement and to the idea of the nation state is a key point of debate in the case studies and their construction of a frame of references within the interurban knowledge transfer. The notion of “backwardness” is discussed as an ambiguous term of reference and value in this context. Clara Maddalena Frysztacka speaks about “ambivalent entanglements between the categories of nation, modernity and the (urban) Europe as the main horizon of references” in the case of Warsaw. The question arises whether the phenomenon of urban poverty, which comes along with massive migration to the modernizing cities, shall be tackled as a subject of the national agenda.

Again, key individuals play important roles in answering such questions and applying different models in cities: Celia Miralles Buil portrays the physician Lluís Sayé as key for the improve of health conditions and the installation of an innovative tuberculosis dispensary in an edge neighbourhood of Barcelona; due to the preference of the municipal engineer Vsevolod Kastalsky, as Anna Mazanik writes, the city of Moscow learns from the much smaller city of Memphis for the installation of a separate sewage system and leaves behind the combined single-pipe system of Hobrecht applied in Berlin (and herewith also a dominant reference). The French medical doctor and scientist Gustave Loisel creates, according to Oliver Hochadel, an “interurban zoological matrix” through a careful first-hand study of zoological gardens and the dissemination of these experiences in his comprehensive three volume book Histoire des ménageries de l’Antiquité à nous jours, the basis for a largely neglected major reform project based on intensive interurban correspondence and a huge personal network.

Ties and interrelations between cities in sometimes “inverted center-periphery trajectories” are created and consolidated in the intersection of individual interests and universal ideas. It becomes evident that in the studied period, eclectic or we could even say hybrid models that emerge out of a continuous process of emulating best practices and adapting them in specific local contexts became worthwhile all over the world and contributed decisively to the development of the Southern and Eastern European cities presented in the book.

A well elaborated index contributes to making the reading a very rich and eclectic experience of knowledge transfer.