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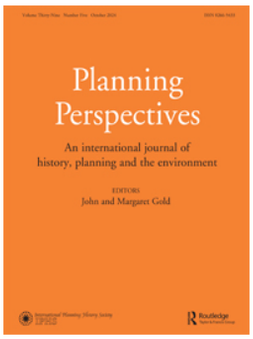

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Architectural history, planning history, and the environmental perspective: a report from Iceland

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, architectural history has responded to the climate crisis by strongly integrating environmental topics into its research agenda. The change has been so dramatic that it can be referred to as a paradigm shift within the discipline. The article reviews research tendencies in the environmental history of architecture by discussing the papers presented at a conference organized in Reykjavik in 2023 and several recent publications. The introduction of environmental perspectives in architectural history appears to call into question consolidated ways of understanding its relationship with planning history. Cities are no longer seen as an essential field of analysis to achieve meaningful generalizations in architectural research; many recent works privilege, on the contrary, the investigation of the flows and movements linking individual buildings to processes taking place at a global or planetary level. The paper discusses the question from three interrelated perspectives (the scales of observation, the articulation of temporalities, and the public role of historians). It argues that the environmental turn affecting many fields of the humanities open the way for rethinking patterns of cross-disciplinary collaboration.

KEYWORDS

Environmental history; architectural history; urban history; planning history; historiography

In a recent editorial dedicated to planning history's changing attitudes towards the environment, John and Margaret Gold reminded us how research in architectural history has been particularly affected by the environmental turn concerning many areas of the humanities.[1] The extent of the phenomenon would indeed be difficult to underestimate. Until about a decade ago, environmental research topics were barely present in architectural history works, and surveys mapping the field often failed to mention it as a recognizable sphere of interest.[2] In recent years, by contrast, histories of architecture inspired by the current climate crisis have multiplied, resulting in something close to a paradigm shift. They have taken the form of both in-depth monographic investigations and broad attempts at reframing general narratives.[3] Although recent debates on the tasks and implications of architectural history have admittedly been stimulated by a plurality of social and cultural factors, the environmental perspective has stood out for its capacity to quickly and effectively re-articulate the priorities within the discipline.[4]

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[1]Gold and Gold, "Planning, History … *and* the Environment?"
[2]Leach, *What is Architectural History?*
[3]Rahm, *Histoire naturelle de l'architecture*; Calder, *Architecture*; Ibelings, *Modern Architecture*.
[4]Aggregate, *Writing Architectural History*.

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Nowhere such change could be better observed than in the conference 'The Third Ecology', organized in Reykjavik by a transnational network of institutions and associations that included the MOMA (through its Emilio Ambasz Institute for the Joint Study of the Built and Natural Environment), the EAHN (European Architectural History Network), and the Icelandic University of the Arts.[5] The event gave scholars working on environmental histories of architecture the first post-pandemic opportunity to gather under the same roof. It offered a broad state of the art of the research, mostly focused on works originating from influential and well-funded universities in North America and Europe. The geographical location in Iceland was evocative of the manifold aspects of the humans/non-humans, ecosphere/technosphere co-dependencies and seemed particularly apt to investigate the relationship between historical knowledge and the environment.[6] In the following pages, I will shortly discuss a few questions that emerged from the conference. I will especially single out three issues – the scales of observation, the articulation of temporalities, and the understanding of the public role of the historian. These arguably operate at different levels but have at least one thing in common: they all appear crucial for the future development of shared research initiatives between architectural and planning history. In fact, although the Reykjavik event was dedicated to establishing an environmental perspective within the specific disciplinary area of architectural history, the debates taking place in this field have potentially far-reaching consequences for a discussion of established patterns of cross-disciplinary knowledge in the study of the built environment.

The scales of observation and the urban variable

'A reframing of the history of architecture writ large according to an understanding of how issues we now identify as environmental have played a role in the production of buildings'. This tentative identification of the task of an environment-oriented history of architecture was offered five years ago by a collective paper on the topic.[7] The definition implied recognizing the interplay between different scales of observation as one of the key aspects of any investigation in the field. This interpretive angle is central to many recent studies, which tend to bring to the foreground the direct, almost unmediated connections between individual buildings on the one hand and processes of planetary relevance on the other hand. The papers of the conference offered a few examples of such shortcuts from the situated to the global: from aquariums and fish canneries to oceans, from libraries to erupting volcanoes, from greenhouses to forests (papers by Marija Barović, Tairan An, Elena M'Bouroukounda, Gent Shehu, and others). The event confirmed that architectural history's traditional penchant for the individual building as an object of investigation is still central in environmental research but tends to receive a more dramatic treatment – one which, in its most extreme versions, may lead to a paradoxical dissolution of architecture in favour of multi-situated histories that pursue a close observation of the flows of movements and resources that are linked to a specific object.[8]

Highlighting materiality is a recurrent way to translate such an approach into concrete research procedures, taking a building's physical elements as an empirical entry point for understanding the forces that shape the global environment.[9] Materiality was one of the keywords behind the initiatives promoted by the Ambasz Institute (most notably the discussion series 'Material Worlds')[10] and

[5]"The Third Ecology" (Reykjavik, 11–13 October 2023), https://thethirdecology.lhi.is/.
[6]Magnason, *On Time and Water*.
[7]Barber et al., "Architecture, Environment, History," 250.
[8]Hutton, *Reciprocal Landscapes*; Moe, *Unless*.
[9]Le Roux, "Circulating Asbestos"; Nannini, *The Icelandic Concrete Saga*.
[10]https://www.moma.org/research/ambasz/material-worlds.

the topic was largely present at the conference, through ongoing research on the history of specific materials such as concrete, asbestos, and plastics (papers by Kim Förster, Meredith TenHoor, and others). Some papers gave an impressive demonstration of the potential of this angle of attack, for example *Łukasz* Stanek's outline of the changes affecting a brick production facility in Ghana between the 1950s and the 1960s, a story that opened interesting questions about the scale and articulation of processes of decolonization in the Global South.

The movement between different scales of observation has traditionally been a privileged ground for interaction between planning, urban, and architectural historians based on the assumption that the study of the spatial and social history of cities allows us to understand the connections between individual buildings and broader historical processes. Although there are examples of recent research works that still pursue a similar agenda, contaminating it with environmental history perspectives,[11] one of the lessons that could be learned from the Reykjavik event was that for many architectural historians cities are no longer seen as a crucial step in the mediation between the particular and the general. This is especially true for investigations that see the non-gradual, sudden shift between the two extremes as a potential heuristic strategy.[12] Only two of the forty-eight papers presented at the conference had titles containing the word 'urban'.

The single research trend that appears to reserve some role to cities as a significant variable of historical analysis is represented by works on the sociotechnical history of climate control. These have demonstrated their potential capacity to offer a unifying background for studies that encompass a plurality of scales of observation ranging from indoor spaces to city and infrastructural planning.[13] Jiat-Hwee Chang's study on tropical architecture in Singapore, which deconstructed colonial politics of climate control as embodied by such diverse objects as private bungalows, barracks, hospitals, and urban reform projects, offered an interesting exploration of such possibilities, as did his paper at the conference – on the case study of Msheireb Downtown, in Doha.[14] Recent attempts to place the urban dimension at the centre of climate analysis include the two-volume project coordinated by Sacha Roesler on the history and future perspectives of 'thermal governance' in cities, based upon both a broad re-assessment of the history of modern urban planning and the monographic observation of the built landscape of four global case studies.[15] Such tendencies, however, were not prominent in Reykjavik: the seminar reflected a cultural situation in which the centrality of climate control studies for environmental histories of architecture is beyond dispute, but much work remains to be done in order to pursue a more robust integration of the urban variable within the framework of ongoing research.

The temporalities of environmental research

The debates inspired by the climate crisis and the Anthropocene have sparked a new interest in the understanding and conceptualization of time within the practices of historical research.[16] I approached the Reykjavik conference hoping to find clues about how such topics were addressed by fellow architectural historians, with reference to the discipline's research traditions. From this point of view, the event was somehow disappointing. The programme was almost entirely based

[11]Crinson, *Shock City*.
[12]Kockelkorn and Zschoke, *Universal/Specific*.
[13]Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*; Barber, *Modern Architecture and Climate*.
[14]Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture*.
[15]Roesler, *City, Climate, and Architecture*; Roesler, Kobi and Stiegler, *Coping with Urban Climates*.
[16]Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.

upon the presentation of papers on specific case studies – a nod to the deeply rooted empirical background of the discipline – and no sessions or round tables were explicitly dedicated to examining broader epistemological, or methodological challenges. This is not to say that interesting discussions did not emerge from individual papers – the sophisticated work by Alena Beth Rieger on the dismantling and reconstruction of a few twentieth-century buildings in Oslo, which elegantly questioned notions of linear temporality in historical storytelling, was a case in point.

One of the stated goals of the conference was to dedicate attention to the history of 1960s and 1970s architectural theories as part of an effort to identify those roots of environmental thinking that developed from within disciplinary reflection and practice. The interest in an architectural archaeology of the environmental question in the long '68 was simultaneously at the center of the MOMA exhibition 'Emerging Ecologies' in New York.[17] The conference title, 'The Third Ecology', directly referenced that intellectual context, borrowing an expression that was recurrent in Serge Chermayeff's writings from the 1970s.[18] Some presentations contributed to the reflection by returning to well-known figures in architectural history, such as Kevin Lynch or Buckminster Fuller, or by unearthing the proto-environmental positions of lesser-known movements, such as Czech 'Necessicism' (papers by Janno Martens, Alison J. Clarke, Ondrej Hojda).

Although the initial call for papers did not preliminarily set any given timeframe, the near totality of the papers focused on twentieth-century topics, with a clear preference for post-WWII subjects and more than occasional incursions in the twenty-first century. Many works explored those roots of the environmental crisis that can be found in the patterns of global capitalist development during the age of the so-called great acceleration.[19] If we were to replace the Reykjavik conference within recent debates on the origins of climate change, we should probably conclude that the majority of the papers were implicitly in line with those critical readings of the notion of Anthropocene that have questioned the latter's capacity to offer politically relevant explanations and have proposed alternative strategies aimed at keeping socio-economic inequalities and responsibilities firmly at the centre of historical analysis.[20] Expressions such as 'Capitalocene' or 'Plantatiocene' did not often resound in the rooms but arguably offered an apt context for many of the stories and interpretations that were presented.[21]

One significant trend that the conference did not sufficiently capture is how ecological anxiety is leading global architectural culture to develop a new interest for 'long' historical narratives. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that a paradoxical conflation of temporalities is a defining character of the understanding of the past in our climate crisis age, marked by the entanglement of the 'global' and the 'planetary' – the documented historical past and the long-term changes affecting life species and the earth system.[22] Signs of uneasiness with the articulation of chronological boundaries are perceptible in recent architectural history works set within a nearly Braudelian *longue durée*. Such is the case of Barnabas Calder's attempt to re-write the global history of architecture under the lens of energy, or Sébastien Marot's exploration of the genealogies of an anti-urban tradition in Western culture.[23] What is worth noting here is that the radical interrogation of the articulation of time in architectural-historical research seems to bring with it a strong interest for cities as an object of inquiry. Visitors to the 18th Architecture Biennale, which was still open in Venice during

[17]Chan and Wagstaffe, *Emerging Ecologies*.
[18]Chermayeff and Tzonis, *The Shape of Community*, 38.
[19]McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*.
[20]Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*.
[21]Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; Haraway, "Anthropocene."
[22]Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*.
[23]Calder, *Architecture*; Marot, *Taking the Country's Side*.

the days of the conference, could appreciate to what extent a part of current architectural culture is obsessed by the study of pre-history and the origin of cities as a starting point for addressing issues such as the growing polarization of wealth and the unequal access to the world's resources. A good example of this – and a centrepiece of the exhibition – was the installation on the archaeological site of Nebelivka (in present-day Ukraine), curated by David Wengrow, Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture, which was a *mise en scène* of the hypotheses presented by the former, together with the late David Graeber, in a much-discussed book.[24]

The public role of the historian

The idea that the climate crisis impacts the social role of historians and their tasks enjoyed a wide circulation at the conference. It was prominent in the opening keynote, given by Samia Henni, and returned in many interventions that encouraged historians to practice public engagement as a much-needed form of action – the near-manifesto offered by Jennifer Mack and Helena Mattson in a passionate paper was a good example of this. A sense of urgency was among the dominant notes of the event.

Moving from the assumption that environmental histories describe processes that are inherently asymmetrical and contribute to building or amplifying social inequalities, many research works emphasized the need to bring such processes to the foreground and deconstruct the narratives that tend to naturalize them. Colonialism, violence, and extractivism were among the cultural filters through which such an interpretation of the historian's role was understood. This is hardly surprising, given the wide circulation such keywords enjoy in contemporary academic thought. The conference showed to what extent environmental histories of architecture may offer a specific contribution to decolonizing historical knowledge because of their fundamental connection to those flows of resources and materials that were crucial in the construction of the modern, globalized world.

A recurrent strategy displayed by the papers was the identification of the losers of environmental history: the natives, the dispossessed, the colonized. Giving voice to the voiceless has been a fundamental task of modern social history at least since the emergence of the Annales school; however, the contributions tended not to study these groups directly – that is, through specific investigation practices aimed at reconstructing their behaviour. They rather evoked them as a background for stories that exposed and analysed the predatory aspects of modern capitalism (as in Michael Faciejew's paper on hydroelectric infrastructure and land grabbing in the early twentieth-century Niagara region). Along a similar path, many presentations were not dedicated to the history of colonialism *per se*, but adopted colonialism as an interpretive category to decipher how twentieth-century societies were shaped by the long-term implications of extractive processes (as in the session 'Empire's Shadow', chaired by Silvia Balzan). Such studies resulted in a powerful message – the need to keep spatial inequalities firmly at the centre of the investigation, the potential role of historical research in building collective awareness. Not everything was perfect, though: the repetitive character of some contributions resulted in stereotyped, almost interchangeable narratives in which the colonized were invariably portrayed as cohesive, non-conflictual communities, living in a harmonious balance with the environment. There were moments in which the moralistic tone and the judgmental attitude of the papers left little room for a rigorous collection of sources and a critical analysis of historical processes and actions.

[24]Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

Planning, although not explicitly evoked, was an important presence in the background of many stories, which aimed at exposing the planning rationalities – many of which non-urban – that appear to have played a role in the territorial grounding of modern capitalism. A plurality of geographical contexts, such as deserts or coastal regions, were the object of specific sessions within the conference (for example the session 'Ecopolitics of the Desert', chaired by Dalal Alsayer). They were observed from the point of view of the interplay between human strategies for controlling the environment, on the one hand, and non-human agency on the other. These research directions brought attention to the study of planning processes that played a crucial role in transforming the global environment but are often overlooked by urbanism-centred planning histories.[25] A clear example was offered by the presentations situating themselves within the burgeoning field of energy histories, with their attention to the impact of energy networks and production systems upon the landscape.[26]

Planning was often portrayed in negative terms within the context of radical interpretations of the political role of the historian: it was represented as a set of techniques and cultural instruments that were instrumental in supporting colonialist projects of global domination. Such a position could be further articulated, and possibly nuanced, by opening a dialogue with those research trends that, while sharing the goal of decolonizing historical knowledge on the built and unbuilt environment, maintain that cities represent a crucial field of observation and discussion. In a series of recent works, Matthew Gandy has for example refined several strategies for writing ecological histories of modern territories along lines that re-affirm the centrality of cities as a crucible for biological, social and political diversity.[27] In the specific field of planning history, Álvaro Sevilla Buitrago's has chosen the commons as an interpretive filter in order to re-write consolidated narratives on the genealogies of urbanism from a perspective that prioritizes issues of dispossession and power imbalance.[28]

Conclusion

The Reykjavik conference showcased the remarkable vitality of the research currently being carried out by architectural historians in relation to the climate crisis.[29] The event placed architectural history firmly at the centre of the stage, exploring how the environmental point of view can contribute to rebuilding the foundations of the discipline upon new ground. Such a programme was associated with a radical attitude, aimed at bringing political and inequality issues at the centre of scholarly discourse. Focusing on the history of global capitalism – on its colonial premises and post-WWII developments – seemed particularly appropriate to investigate the link between architecture and the extraction and consumption of the planet's resources. Although these tendencies were prevailing, the conference also documented the existence of a plurality of methodological approaches and interpretations of the historian's role, which appear even more visible when observing the global panorama of recent publications. Environmental histories of architecture are very much an open field for experimentation and debate.

In the previous pages I have argued that, despite ritual evocations of classic works in urban-environmental history such as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, recent environmental

[25]Henni, *Deserts Are Not Empty*.
[26]Hein, *Oil Spaces*.
[27]Gandy, *Natura Urbana*.
[28]Sevilla Buitrago, *Against the Commons*.
[29]Förster, "Undisciplined Knowing."

histories of architecture seem to dedicate only a limited attention to cities.[30] This may positively bring a stronger light upon the history of non-urban planning practices and traditions. It however also implies that the current tendency towards re-writing architectural histories from the point of view of climate anxiety has only marginally brought to a re-conceptualization of the historical connections – which were undoubtedly strong – between modern architecture and modern urban planning.[31] This is certainly a point that planning historians might want to notice. After all, planning shares with architecture a multi-faceted, and in many ways difficult legacy in which practices that have impacted negatively on the transformation of the environment have coexisted with experiences that may appear interesting and worthy of further investigation from the perspective of present-day concerns.

The issues at stake in these conversations are however broader. One of the challenges coming from the environmental turn in the humanities lies in an encouragement to cross the frontiers currently existing between disciplinary fields, and this is particularly true for those study areas – such as architectural, urban, planning and landscape histories – that have developed their expertise through various types of mutual collaboration and rivalry over the last century. The impact of the climate crisis does not only concern the ways in which research questions are framed within each of these disciplines, but also an in-depth re-assessment of the latter's goals and reciprocal tasks. The time is ripe for historians of the built and natural environments to rethink the scientific boundaries of their practice and imagine new forms of cross-disciplinary interrogation that might result in unexpected ways to conceptualize historical objects and knowledge.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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[30]Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*.
[31]Haffner, *Landscapes of Housing*.

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