



MEETING REPORT

Conference report: ‘The state of urban history: past, present, future’, Leicester, 11–13 July 2023

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In July 2023, the *Urban History* journal celebrated its 50th anniversary with a conference which took stock of the state of urban history as a field – its past achievements, present developments and future direction. Hosted by the University of Leicester, an institution which is synonymous with the study of urban history, the three-day conference evinced how far the discipline has come since the journal’s conception, initially as the *Urban History Newsletter*, in the 1960s. Through its overarching theme, the conference was as much a moment to reflect on the fruits of the past 50 years as it was about posing questions of where the discipline is heading in the years to come. As a result, the papers which constituted the 33 panels, round-tables and plenaries were wide-ranging, both temporally and geographically, and strongly indicative of future directions for research.

In her introductory welcome, Roey Sweet paid tribute to H.J. Dyos, the founding father of urban history in Britain, and contextualized where this uniquely interdisciplinary field of research found its roots. Sweet made clear the international community which has grown out of a sustained engagement with the journal since its inception. A brief scan of the conference programme evidenced this most powerfully – today the field of urban history is represented by several generations of scholars and practitioners working in fields outside the traditional bounds of history alone, and from a vast multitude of localities across the globe. The four keynote lecturers, all women, represented several historiographical shifts in recent years: women’s agency in medieval and early modern European cities was explored by Martha Howell (Columbia University); the ‘global turn’ in modern urban history was traced by Lynn Hollen Lees (University of Pennsylvania); histories of race, racism and marginalization formed the keynote given by Kennetta Hammond Perry (Northwestern University) and contemporary histories of migration in the Global South were analysed by Brenda Yeoh (National University of Singapore). Together, the keynotes traced a number of established and emerging geographical, temporal and thematic areas that stretch the bounds of urban history beyond a predominant focus on Western Europe and North America.

These emerging areas of interest have all built on solid disciplinary foundations. Lynn Hollen Lees reminded the audience that the field owes its existence to a group of around 40 individuals, made up predominantly of white males, who founded the Urban History Group in Britain in 1966. The focus of much early research, the fruits of which found its way into the pages of the early issues of the *Urban History*

Yearbook, the journal's forebear, were almost entirely on British towns and cities. While the field of enquiry has undeniably expanded past the locales of Britain over its 50 years, with many articles published on North American, Western European and South Asian cities, the field is undergoing a turn towards global and transnational urban histories. Urban history's *present*, and therefore its future, consciously operates in a transnational setting, as evidenced in the conference programme and the attendees who had gathered in Leicester from across the world. Each of the eight sessions which ran across the three days included parallel panels focusing on one or multiple locations which sit outside the traditional bounds of urban history. We heard papers centred on urbanities in Eastern Europe, South America, Africa, Australasia and the Middle East, each of which denoted the move in recent years to globalize urban history scholarship. Papers which considered how history is documented and written in contested terrains such as Palestine/Israel, stood alongside others which focused on the transgression of boundaries in the divided cities of South Africa. We also heard how historians are writing the histories of Australian cities into global and urban historical narratives, and how Ukraine's scholars are writing their own urban histories during the present war, dealing with new forms of historical documents in what is arguably one of the most widely reported conflicts to date. This variety of international panels mirrors the efforts of the editors of the journal who are encouraging this global turn in the field; it is to be hoped that many of the proceedings of the conference are eventually published in future issues of the journal.

Given the field's distinctly inter-disciplinary roots, it was of no surprise that several panels dealt with underutilized or emergent methodologies. Of particular note were the two panels which centred around the use of emotional and experiential methodologies. Both panels included papers which questioned why the built form matters and specifically how we can re-examine sources through the lenses of emotion and experience. Another panel contentiously asked, 'Where is the economic history?' The speakers questioned why economic issues have been sidelined in recent scholarship and made an impassioned plea for historians to ask simple questions about cost and value when studying everyday urban transactions. In addition, a roundtable organized by the Global Urban History Project (GUHP) provided much food for thought, with proposals for a truly global, or indeed planetary, coverage that transgresses traditional boundaries of time and space. It was suggested, for example, that we should look past traditional temporalities which focus on capitalist notions such as when wars began and ended, and that we should even be widening the lens to look past the city limits and extend urban histories into non-traditional 'urban' settings (a point also raised by the small number of environmental history panels).

When looking back over the last half century of the journal, it is both reassuring and exciting to see that the field is every bit as open to radical inter-disciplinarity as it was in the 1960s, yet simultaneously heading in ever-more new directions. In his editorial to the first issue of the *Urban History Yearbook*, published in 1974, Dyos noted 'the almost overwhelming growth in the number of scholars taking part... and the immensely wider range of topics and techniques they have been pursuing'.¹ Today, 50 years on, the field of urban history stands true to these initial principles: more diverse, certainly in its composition of scholars and topics of research, but still

¹H.J. Dyos, 'Editorial', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1 (1974), 3.

steadfastly committed to the inter-disciplinarity of the first generation and their pursuit of the totality of the urban experience. Those attending the conference, myself included, left assured that this celebration marks merely the *first* 50 years of the journal, with many more to come in the pursuit of urban history.

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