

*The final manuscript of the first of four 'Kolumne' features in the ETH Zürich journal **disP** authored by Michael Hebbert over the course of 2017. This piece appeared on pages 4-5 of issue no. 208 (53.1).*

### **disP 2017 Kolumne 1**

Of all planning journals disP most clearly embodies a European perspective. So it's a privilege for this Briton to take on the disP *Column* for 2017, year of Britain's rejection of Europe and sad (in every sense) pursuit of insularity. Thoughts about nationalism, regionalism and the European project are inevitably going to crop up through the four instalments of 2017's *Column*, but my main focus is going to be on time rather than space. Fifty years ago I was a history undergraduate at Oxford; today I'm approaching the end of my term as Editor-in-Chief of *Planning Perspectives*, the leading historical journal in our field. So the *Column* offers a nice opportunity to reflect on historical research, its uses and abuse, and its vital importance.

It might seem blindingly obvious that you can't plan the future unless you understand the past but the truth is that historians struggle to retain a foothold in the curricula and research agendas of planning schools. We got a very nasty shock recently when we read the Call for Papers for AESOP's Lisbon Conference of 11-14 July 2017 - *Spaces of Dialogue for Places of Dignity - fostering the European Dimension of Planning*. The organizers invited submissions across six

themes and twenty-one tracks, covering every conceivable angle of planning research - theory, pedagogy, citizenship, urban design, green infrastructures, territorial cohesion, multiculturalism, regional economics, transnational planning, housing, public health, tourism, transport, smart cities, law, urban metabolism, big data, complexity, sustainability, urban disaster, and future challenges and visions . . . the only thing missing was prior experience. Not only was there no dedicated track for historical papers but the very words 'history', 'past' and 'precedent' were absent from the 7400 words of track description: by contrast 'increasing', 'emerging', and 'future' all got a good airing and the word 'new' was repeated no less than 28 times.

In response to a formal protest from Prof. Dr. Dirk Schubert as President of the International Planning History Society the Local Organizing Committee graciously modified the programme to provide a special historical session within the Planning Theory track. However the original Call for Papers remained unamended and the conference publicity still offers no hint that 'fostering the European dimension of planning' requires a modicum of historical understanding. We get the impression that European schools of planning are like ships' figure-heads, ever peering towards horizons ahead, never regarding the wake astern.

Of course, your past brings you where you are, and the more you ignore it the less you can escape it. Historical indifference allows myths to become facts and old problems to be continuously recycled as 'new' solutions. AESOP's attitude is all the more surprising because the state of historiography in our field has never

been more dynamic, with vigorous current research on the second half of the twentieth century and significant discoveries being made about - for example - design culture in the Eastern bloc during Cold War years and after 1989, about the work of European experts in Africa during the post-colonial transition, about the realities of town planning in China under Mao, and about the life histories of squatter settlements, subsequently regularised, in cities of the global South. In a subsequent *Column* I shall be exploring some of these strands of recent work through a retrospective on my time with *Planning Perspectives*. But as an opener, let's take a small project of my own, undertaken as part of the celebration of last year's 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London. Appropriately, it concerns a column: a gigantic Doric Column 62 metres tall, designed by Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke in commemoration of the Great Fire and constructed between 1671 and 1677.

The Monument is located 62 metres from the outbreak of the fire at a bakery in Pudding Lane on 6 September 1666. Topped with a golden fire-ball (recently regilded) it commemorates the catastrophic destruction of London and - even more vividly - the city's almost immediate reconstruction, panoramically visible from the platform up the 311 spiral stairs. Wren wanted to crown his column not with the image of flames but with a gilded statue of King Charles II. On the western face of the plinth he mounted a gigantic bas-relief by Caius Cibber showing the monarch as town-planner, bringing succour to the devastated city. The heroic classical style evokes the contemporaneous images of Louis XIV in the Place des Victoires and on the triumphal arches of the Porte St-Martin and the Porte St-Denis, reminding us that Wren had been in Paris in the months

before the Great Fire, studying the latest works of European Baroque architecture and urbanism. At the Palais du Louvre he met Gian Lorenzo Bernini who had just created for Pope Alexander VII the great geometrical piazza in front of St. Peter's. Full of admiration for the spaciousness and symmetry of such projects, Wren submitted to Charles II a reconstruction plan for London within a week of the Great Fire, showing how the city's irregular mediaeval street layout could be replaced by a rational pattern of straight lines and axial symmetry.

The King was to receive several such schemes in the aftermath of the disaster, but the scroll he proffers to the wilting figure of London in Cibber's bas-relief is none of them. What Charles II provided instead was a set of building regulations to standardise dwelling types and ensure fireproof construction, enabling reconstruction to proceed so rapidly that London had been largely rebuilt on existing street alignments by the time Wren's Monument was finished in 1677. What's more, these ordinances laid the basis for the entire tradition of Georgian terraced dwellings, a typology whose importance in the context of European urban history was recognised and celebrated by the Danish Steen Eiler Rasmussen in his classic *London: the Unique City* of 1934.

Unfortunately, Wren's followers and family didn't forget the might-have-been of a geometrical reconstruction. Over the decades of the eighteenth century they embroidered a narrative in which Sir Christopher's rapid sketch became a fully worked-out plan, approved by King and Parliament, and thwarted only by a faction of self-interested property-owners. Repeated throughout the nineteenth century by public health activists, local government reformers and town

planners, the supposed precedent of Wren's frustrated plan for London offered a potent myth of collective action. It continued to influence reconstruction discourse of the 1940s and even the urban renewal projects of the 1960s, always with the implicit ideological message that great vision should never again be thwarted by petty self-interest.

Enter the historians, whose research puts Wren's post-Fire intervention back into perspective as a brilliant, rapid confection of the Continental design motifs he had admired in France and perhaps discussed with Bernini in 1665. In the year ahead I hope to tell the full, fascinating story of its three-hundred-year after-life as a Great Planning Myth.

*author bio & photo*

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