

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Cultural Boundaries: The City in Central Europe from 1800 to the Present

A Conference held at the University of Northumbria,
Newcastle upon Tyne, 8–10 September 1994

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This conference, the first major event mounted by the Research Group in European Urban Culture at the University of Northumbria, set out to explore key aspects of urban culture in Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a genuinely interdisciplinary gathering which brought historians of art, architecture, design, and film together with social and cultural historians.

The opening sessions of the conference focused on German cities as art centres and the impact of the art market on art production. Robin Lenman's survey of German art centres and their satellites from 1820–1920 identified ingredients which made cities such as Munich, Berlin, Dresden, and Düsseldorf thrive as centres of artistic output: tourist attractions (tourists being purchasers of art as souvenirs), the presence of museums and art academies, and the existence of market outlets. Once a national and international art market was established, 'satellites' (e.g. Worpswede) could develop, physically separate from the main art centres but connected with them through the market. The next two papers focused on art and the art market in Weimar Germany. Malcolm Gee's case study of Berlin looked at the way in which rival groupings in the art establishment struggled to occupy the 'progressive' ground, and at how the art dealers Ferdinand Möller and Alfred Flechtheim (the latter immortalized in Otto Dix's portrait) competed with each other to promote 'difficult' modern art to public galleries and private collectors, helping in the process to create the market for German Expressionist and French Cubist painting. The power wielded by a local art establishment was a theme also taken up in the paper on the Hanover group of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists by Marsha Meskimmon, who stressed the influence of the local context on the group's development. The Hanover group positively dissociated themselves from the avant-garde 'high art' patronized by the self-consciously cosmopolitan local élite, exemplified by biscuit king Hermann Bahlsen, who displayed Expressionist paintings in his factory. Eschewing such patronage, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* group

lived simply, painted part-time, and developed their own style of figurative art, which stressed both their local Hanover identity and their solidarity with workers.

Cities themselves—as artefacts, the objects of planning, and as cultural environments—were the focus of the next session. In ‘Traffic—A Symphony’ (a title paying homage to Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 documentary *Berlin: Die Symphonie einer Großstadt*), Tony McElligott plunged into the traffic chaos of Germany’s burgeoning cities in the early twentieth century and found, if not a symphony, at least a cacophony of conflicting voices calling variously for freedom for the modern motorist and the low-flying aeroplane and for a rationalized system of traffic regulation to protect the pedestrian and the neighbourhood from the fall-out of the modern cult of speed. Matthew Jefferies shifted the focus from the street to the buildings and the skyline in his paper on Paul Bröcker, the architectural publicist and prophet of Hamburg’s brick revival of the early twentieth century. Bröcker’s achievement in paving the way for the renewal of Hamburg’s *Stadtbild* through a distinctive style blending local Hamburg traditions with the principles of architectural modernism has, Jefferies argued, been unjustly neglected by architectural historians too preoccupied with the role of Fritz Schumacher.

The next papers ranged geographically across the whole of central Europe and as far north as the Baltic. Luda Klusakowa took her listeners on an illuminating tour of eastern European towns from Plzen to Tartu between the late eighteenth and the late nineteenth century, stressing the importance of looking at smaller towns as well as the more obvious centres of Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest in order to obtain a fuller picture of the urban experience in central and eastern Europe. She explored the common features which connected urban centres across the Habsburg territories and beyond, as well as the differences between them in their functions and political status. National movements and their suppression were reflected in the struggles by urban élites to develop towns as showpieces of national culture. This theme of nationalism expressed through the cultivation and renewal of a town’s architectural heritage was taken up in David Crowley’s case study of Cracow at the turn of the century. Wawel Hill in Cracow, the ‘altar of the fatherland’, provided in its cathedral and other monuments a focal point of the national struggle: having been occupied and ‘desecrated’ by the Habsburg authorities, the site was finally and triumphantly reclaimed by the Poles in 1905. After this moment of triumph, however, as Crowley illustrated by showing cartoons of rival (fictional) restoration plans exhibited in the Green Balloon cabaret, conflicting elements in Polish nationalism began to assert themselves and to lay claim to the cultural heritage represented by Wawel. Whereas the Polish national revival looked to the architecture of the past for inspiration, in post-1918 Czechoslovakia, as Jane Pavitt showed in her paper on town planning, too much emphasis on the past could be divisive. Planners looked instead to architectural modernism to express the coherence and dynamism of the new state. In Prague this led to efforts to promote light-flooded glass constructions—beacons of modernity—amidst or even in place of the historic buildings of the old city. In the

town of Zlin (created by the shoe firm Bata for its employees), the planners could start from scratch. While partly inspired by garden city ideas and firmly wedded to traditional family housing, Zlin was also a showcase for modern architecture: a high-rise office block *à la* Corbusier contained the director's office in a glass-walled lift designed for spot checks on subordinates (though apparently one could hear the lift coming).

Up to this point, the focus of the conference had been on high culture. Tim Kirk in his paper on pre-1914 Vienna set out to locate high culture more precisely in its relation to popular culture, arguing that the boundaries between the two were redrawn and sharpened in the nineteenth century. New definitions of taste reinforced the social domination of an increasingly large and affluent middle class. Rather than challenging these cultural values, Austrian Social Democratic leaders sought to disseminate them among the working class and hoped that through promoting cheap editions of Zola and reproductions of paintings by Liebermann they might drive out kitsch from workers' homes. The theme of Social Democratic attempts to 'deproletarianize' the Viennese working class and to reform working-class life to make it conform to notions of respectability and health was continued by Gerhard Melinz in his paper on municipal welfare policies in the 'Red Vienna' of the 1920s and—by way of comparison and contrast—under the Christian Social régimes of 1931 onwards, which preserved some elements of Social Democratic welfare policy while restoring Catholic influence and intensifying disciplinary measures targeted at the 'feckless' poor.

Cultural anxieties about the 'disorderly' or 'degraded' lives of the urban poor and the quest for order on the city streets were themes which recurred in two contrasting and thought-provoking papers on prostitution by Karin Jušek (on Vienna) and Susan Zimmermann (on Budapest). Karin Jušek began by challenging commonly held notions that prostitution in late nineteenth-century Vienna escalated into a major social problem. Such notions, she argued, were products of moral panic, fuelled by a range of interest groups: the police, who wanted an excuse to raid the Viennese underworld; the Christian Socials, who sought a pretext to attack Jews (as alleged white slave traders); the Social Democrats, who seized on the economic exploitation of prostitutes as a campaigning issue; the feminists, who were outraged by prostitution as an insult to womanhood; and the doctors, who as usual wanted new professional fields to conquer. Susan Zimmermann, approaching the phenomenon from a different methodological angle, argued for a history of prostitution that would be part of a social history of poverty. Prostitutes, she argued, belonged, along with the casually employed and occasional beggars, to an intermediate zone of urban poverty between the absolute outcasts and the respectable wage-earning working class. Modern social policies sought to eliminate this grey zone, driving a wedge between different categories of the urban poor in order to control their behaviour more effectively. As a result, adult women who worked regularly as prostitutes and were prepared to register as such came to be regarded as a category to be tolerated as part of the urban landscape—in contrast to beggars, who were

designated a nuisance to be removed.

Andreas Brunner took up Jušek's theme of morals and moral panic in Vienna in his contribution on sensational trials, which owed their impact to a salacious popular press feeding on stories of sexual deviance. A lone voice in the press jungle defending a consistently libertarian position on sexual morality was that of Karl Kraus, whose call in *Die Fackel* for the decriminalization of homosexuality was sparked in 1904 by the case of Dr Theodor Beer, charged under the Habsburg monarchy's peculiarly harsh anti-homosexuality legislation. A final contribution on Vienna came from Steven Beller, who argued that Jews were central to the high modern bourgeois liberal culture which—according to Beller—dominated the city at the turn of the century. With their aspirations to education, liberty, and property, the Jews formed the very culture into they were seeking to assimilate themselves. In discussion, a more complex picture both of Vienna and of the Jews emerged, which stressed both the diversity of cultures in fin-de-siècle Vienna and the role assimilated Jews played in forming not only bourgeois liberal culture but also the milieu of Catholic conservatism and Social Democracy.

Two final contributions moved the focus of the proceedings back to Berlin and portrayals of Berlin in the media. Comparing three versions of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as novel, as a radio play (never broadcast), and as a film (in collaboration with Piel Jutzi), Peter Jelavich argued compellingly that Döblin's most successful encapsulation of the modern big city experience was through the novel, where he succeeded in representing (in the figure of Bieberkopf) the 'decentred subject' of modern city life. In the radio play and film, conventional narrative and characterization were restored and the point of the novel lost. Still wedded to traditional modes of storytelling, the modern media of the 1920s were thus the least effective vehicles for Döblin's radical statement about the dehumanizing effect of modern city life. Moving to the 1980s, Sabine Jaccaud also looked at the portrayal of Berlin on film, this time by Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire*. Jaccaud carefully analysed the film's twin approaches to exploring Berlin's past: recording 'memory traces' of the city's inhabitants, and (in the film within the film) reconstructing scenes from the past with the aid of props, sets and actors. While some in the audience remained unsympathetic to Wenders and his brand of nostalgia, Jaccaud brought the conference's consideration of the central European city to a topical close with the current plans for the reconstruction of the Potsdamer Platz.

The quality of the offerings and the liveliness of the exchanges during and between sessions made this an outstanding conference, rewarding the efforts of the organizers, Malcolm Gee, Tim Kirk, and Jill Steward, in bringing together specialists from different disciplines—nearly half of them from abroad—around common themes. Given the coherence of the programme and the standard of the papers, it is to be hoped that the conference proceedings will be published and reach the wide audience they richly deserve.