

URBAN RETROSPECTION

A Review of:

The Historian and The City

Edited by O. Handlin and J. Burchard

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Symposia are ideal media for the exchange of scholarly opinions because the governing bodies of universities and foundations have not yet realized that "symposium" is simply the Greek word for "a drinking party." Admittedly, this symposium shows only slight evidence of the stimulating influence of alcohol, though the affluence of printer's inkohol is evident in M.I.T.'s well-produced paperback text. The editing is a bit fuddled, for the origins of Philadelphia are described 120 pages after the description of the city's development in the 19th century, whilst on page 71, the assertion "Professor Brogan has cited..." seems clearly nonsensical, since Professor Brogan's paper does not appear until page 146. However, these lapses are evidently due to a rearrangement of the original sequence, and it must be admitted that the published sequence is ideal, *provided it is read in reverse.*

Literary "stylists" doubtless favor an arrangement whereby a book becomes more and more absorbing as it reaches its end. But there must be many who, like Soames Forsyte's great-uncle James and myself, happily display their senility by gobbling the most succulent morsels first, so that satiety results only when the most unappetizing parts remain. Anyway, I strongly recommend readers of *The Historian and the City* to start with the final chapter; and the fact that the editor himself has contributed this chapter, rather than a preface, suggests that he himself would secretly approve such advice.

Let us begin, then, by considering "Part VII: Conclusion," written by John Burchard in his most brilliant mood. The aim of the symposium was, he states, to confront those who teach city planning, or the history of city planning, with other kinds of historians—economists, political scientists, and philosophers—in the hope of determining how the history of cities can most profitably be studied in relation to the actual problems of urban design. The result, as he frankly observes, was futile; only the most callous and credulous reader will find logic in his prophecy that the next symposium on the subject will prove more helpful. This conclusion is almost an insult to the eminent and distinguished contributors to the volume under review.

The futility resulted mainly from the fact that "there was no real effort to define what we were talking about, either history or the city. The definition of the latter was of course the more slippery." However, there is no reason to assume that the failure to produce viable definitions was due either to the oversight or the incompetence of the participants. Dean Burchard might usefully have added that the main danger in studying cities historically is precisely that the scholar is irresistibly led to escape from considering what a city is by elaborating on what it was in the past. His own favorite definition of a city as "the congeries which multiply the opportunity to exercise choice" seems excellent; but, as he himself points out, the most important discrepancy between the attitudes of the various speakers revolved around the problem as to whether every city is unique, or whether, on the contrary, all cities have enough common characteristics to permit the notion of "the city" to be studied in abstract concepts.

This discrepancy was never resolved. Indeed, none of the speakers whose ideas are published seems to have even grappled with the dilemma during the symposium. Those who discussed cities abstractly talked a good deal about "parameterization," but were singularly reticent about the precise character of the parameters they envisaged. Those who concentrated on individual cities only became eloquent when describing economic developments during the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, whilst the occasional desperate endeavors of economists and social historians to introduce architecture into the argument often lacked conviction.

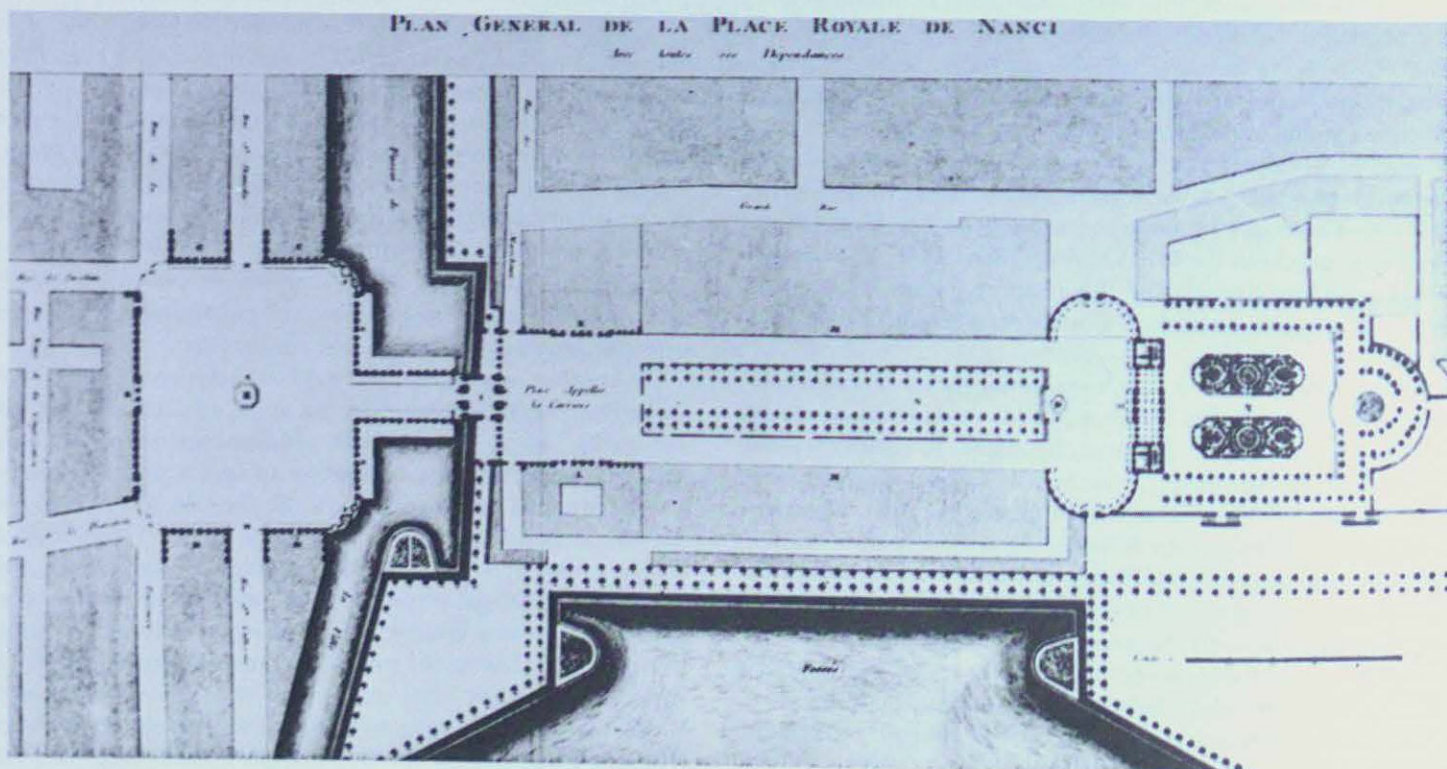
"Another question that went largely unasked," writes Dean Burchard, "was whether the study of urban history had any utility." He noted that Henry Millon had asserted that the historian was under no obligation to find a utilitarian value for history, and admitted himself that he saw "no reason why the life of a city may not be as good a thing to start from as anything else in the examination even of young ladies." This latter argument is extremely cogent, as I can verify after conducting a summer course on the History of Paris for Smith College. But, clearly, the purpose of the symposium at M.I.T. was not to discover what teachers of urban history can learn about their female students, but what the students themselves can learn about the present and future states of a city

by studying its history; for there seems little point in having the symposium at all if it is already taken for granted that all knowledge is useful.

However, the participants in the symposium had the right to assume, for the sake of argument, that if the history of cities is of practical use, there must be some ways of studying it that are superior to others; and, in this respect, the best part of *The Historian and the City* is the penultimate section in which Sir John Summerson, in a characteristically explicit and lucid paper, demonstrates that Mumford's superficial approach does more harm than good, for, as he emphasizes, it is essential to study the history of cities in minute detail after having obtained all the available evidence relating to the social, psychological, economic, and technological forces by which they were formed. Nevertheless, Sir John Summerson would probably be the first to admit the validity of Mr. Warner's complaint regarding the inaccessibility of so many of the documents necessary for a complete assessment of even the smallest urban units, and the unmanagability of the

mass of documents that are accessible for the larger units.

Perhaps the clue to the whole problem is to be found in Christopher Tunnard's paper, where he makes a firm distinction between "city planning" and "urban design." He seems to suggest that historical studies are only really relevant to the small groups of buildings that form the nuclei of larger urban agglomerations. Here, as he points out, qualitative measurements of the constituents of environmental appropriateness can be studied accurately and comparatively. It thus seems likely that the professional planning consultant, faced with the problem of advising administrators and financiers on future expansion, must rely more on studies of current economic, sociological, and psychological forces, rather than on the history of such forces; and that the history of cities is only useful to future planners in so far as it deals with the evolution of architectural forms, and the formulation of architectural ideals, made manifest when groups of buildings were designed by a single architect, or organized by a concerted team.



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