

NEW URBANISM, OLD URBANISM: OLD URBANISM AND THE CLIMACTERIC OF 1900

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The word 'urbanism' is 99 years old.

For the great cities of Europe and America the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the very last days of primordial hoof and foot circulation, the moment of intensest economic exploitation of street space for advertising, retailing, recreation and, for the poorest, survival. Every element of the wealth of cities - their human capital, their ethnic variety, their civic dynamism, their functional infrastructure, their business organisation at every scale, and all the unwanted byproducts of all these activities - jostled for space within the narrow confines of the canyon street. The turn of the century also marked a climax of eugenic anxiety around the effects of city living on the racial stock, an issue given political edge by the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the great powers.

The original urbanist (or town planning) movement is best understood as a reformist response to the crisis of the street. The movement was international in scope and eclectic in focus. It embraced garden-city romantics, Beaux-Arts architects of long civic vistas, housing reformers, techno-engineers. They disagreed on much, but joined in the basic premise that their task was to free the machine age city from the confinement of walls, hard paving, congestion, stink, and social promiscuity.

Urbanism was pushing at an open door, though it opened only slowly in the first half of the century. After 1950 the hollowing-out of the urban fabric began in earnest. And with it, began a reappraisal of the founding axioms of urbanism, and a sequence of enquiry and experiment that was as international and as eclectic as the original movement. By way of Rossi, Alexander, Jacobs, Cooper, Panerai, Krier, and DPZ, we have arrived at a new urbanism for the close of the twentieth century. Now, the street which was the problem has become the solution.

My paper explores this paradoxical inversion. It is part of a work in progress on urbanism and the street in the twentieth century, under a two year fellowship from the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851.

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