

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Almandoz, Arturo, ed. *Planning Latin America's Capital Cities, 1850–1950*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xii, 282. Illustrations, maps, index. \$120 (hardcover)

William French

Volume 33, Number 1, Fall 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015686ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015686ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

French, W. (2004). Review of [Almandoz, Arturo, ed. *Planning Latin America's Capital Cities, 1850–1950*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xii, 282. Illustrations, maps, index. \$120 (hardcover)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 33(1), 64–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015686ar>

section are Dora Weiner and Michael Sauter's recapitulation of the rise of the medical clinic in Paris, Denise Phillips's study of the Isis Society in Dresden, and Sven Dierig's study of Carl Ludwig and mechanical respiration in Leipzig. The intellectual magnet of Paris attracts the attention of four contributors: David Aubin, Theresa Levitt, and Antoine Picon consider mid-19th-century astronomers, physicists, and urban map-makers, and J. Andrew Mendelson examines microbiologists Alexandre Yersin and Emile Roux. The 20th-century section collects Karin Bijsterveld on noise pollution in the Netherlands, Hans Pol and Christian Topalov on urban sociology in America and Europe, Jens Lachmund on botanical field-work in war-devastated cities, and Rosemary Wakeman on utopian planning for technopolis in France.

Bijsterveld and Lachmund suggest how archives may be used in a new way, but all the chapters are based on models of biographical and institutional narrative dating from the early part of the 20th century; they succeed or fail by their use of the usual kinds of unpublished correspondence and secondary sources. The volume provides no trace of *annalier* or cliometric innovations. There is no appeal to a *longue durée*, no statistics, virtually no prosopography, and very little discussion about money. In the most persuasive chapters—Weiner and Sauter's summary of the Paris clinic, Levitt's discussion of the Biot-Arago controversy over the polarimeter, and Wakeman's analysis of planning in the Fourth and Fifth French Republics—the city as such shapes scientific ideas not at all. It is like the ether—imponderable, everywhere present, and irrelevant for both theoretical invention and experimental design. There are missed opportunities. In her study of Dresden science, for example, Phillips omits reference to art, the city's cultural jewel. Mendelsohn contends that Yersin's microbiological style was a kind of urban fieldwork (notwithstanding Yersin's fascination with exotic travel and his many years in Indochina!): "The Impressionists' art and Yersin's microbiology are understandable as parallel expressions of the same, transformed urban physical and human geography" (154). But no evidence is supplied of theories or disease metaphors or figures of speech deriving from Yersin's youthful fascination with the City of Lights.

Sven Dierig provides an illuminating account of Carl Ludwig's invention of a mechanical lung, his urban laboratory "the place where the first living organism that was part machine and part animal was created and brought into use for scientific purposes" (128). Dierig emphasizes Ludwig's inspiration in industrial factories. Surely it is reasonable, however, to see the instruments of late 19th-century physiology as a derivation from physics and the enormous prestige of the physician-turned-physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, who as director of Berlin's Physikalisch-technische Reichsanstalt supervised physical and electrical standards for the German empire. Dierig concludes, "When clockworks, hand cranks, and foot pedals were replaced by the iron laboratory worker, the urban laboratory revolution became an industrial revolution in situ" (134). This is produc-

tion-line science, like Justus von Liebig's laboratory in organic chemistry set up a generation earlier, which led into (rather than derived from) industrialization. We never learn why the *city* was necessary for Ludwig's work. It was not necessary for the physicists in Königsberg who founded their discipline, earlier in the century *before Germany industrialized*, on exacting measurement of nature's constants.

To readers with a long view of history, the rhetoric in this volume will call to mind previous disjunctures between faith and evidence: religious invocations preceding medieval Islamic treatises in astronomy; the insertion of the Deity into 17th-century natural philosophy; myriad 19th-century books about the proofs of Christianity in the natural world; weighty tomes on science and proletarian history appearing in the 1980s in East Germany and Romania; and equally weighty volumes on creationist science appearing around the world today. *Science and the City* radiates more heat than light. Here smoulder the embers of postmodernist caprice.

Lewis Pyenson
Center for Louisiana Studies
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Almandoz, Arturo, ed. *Planning Latin America's Capital Cities, 1850–1950*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xii, 282. Illustrations, maps, index. \$120 (hardcover).

"Paris goes West," "a mirror image of a European metropolis," "America's most European city," and "the Paris of the Hispanic American Republics." Such descriptions of Latin American cities in the century between 1850 and 1950, taken from numerous chapters in the present book, help reveal the extent of Europe's ascendancy in the transfer of urban ideals and models to that region, the central theme of those contributing to this volume.

Given that this process of "Europeanization" (as it is referred to by the editor) varied, the book is organized into three broad sections, with the first treating the capitals of the booming 19th-century economies, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo; the second dealing with Mexico City and Lima, early viceregal capitals that suffered decline after independence; and the third focusing on capital cities in the Caribbean rim and Central America, specifically Havana, Caracas, and San José, cities that have seldom been described as sharing in this process. Within this broad time frame, three phases of Latin America's dependence, characterized by correspondingly distinct urban planning models, are further identified: (1) the second half of the 19th century, during which time the increase of European capital led to the selective adaptation of Haussmann's ideas in many parts of the region; (2) the *belle époque* from the late 19th century until well after the First World War, which was associated with sanitary reforms, urban renewal, and residential expansion; and (3) the period after 1930,

one of urbanization and increasing "Americanization," during which time, nevertheless, Europe maintained its predominance in providing urban models.

Yet, as much as these general conclusions help advance our understanding of the relatively little-known history of urban planning in Latin America, the volume also offers important conceptual tools that might be usefully employed in any work of urban history. Despite the repeated use of terms like *transfer* and *Europeanization*, which seem to construct Latin America as the passive recipient of European planning ideas as well as investment, the editor and those contributing to the volume actually see a much more dynamic role for Latin Americans in selecting, reshaping, and reinventing European urbanism and planning ideas. Roberto Segre, for example, explores what he refers to as expressions of "Caribbean environmental syncretism" that were being forged daily in Havana (198), while Lorenzo Gonzalez Casas uses the notion of "game" to characterize the struggle between imported notions and the specific conditions found in Caracas (214). Urban patterns found in late-19th- and early-20th-century neighbourhoods in Mexico City provide sufficient evidence for Carol McMichael Reese to reject outright assessments that describe Mexico City's development at this time as more "French" than Mexican. For her, the persistence of Mexican urban traditions marked the city as Mexican as well as modern.

A further strength of the volume is that it demonstrates what can be achieved by utilizing a "cultural approach" to the study of urban planning and urbanism. For many authors, this means analyzing the relationship between the transfer of urban ideals and models, on the one hand, and urban culture and its representation, on the other. Thus, in a provocative chapter on Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Margareth de Silva Pereira brings into a single analytical frame urban reform, associated with circulation,

hygiene and embellishment, and urban discourse, the circulation of new vocabulary and images of the city, including words like the *suburb* and the *barrio* (new districts or neighbourhoods). For her, economics, class formation and identification, urban reform, discourse, and image form part of the same history of modernity. Likewise, Gonzalez Casas is concerned with urban modernity in Caracas. For him, new and modern ways of looking are as apparent in images of nationality, sovereignty and citizenship, and in Venezuelan literature, as they are in urban space. Territory, architecture, public space, discourse, and literature all comprise part of the same story of modernity and its negotiation.

One further point bears mentioning in regard to this fine volume. The attention to the use of images as a means of representing the city and urban space, so important in the chapters discussed in the previous paragraph, in fact characterizes the entire volume. Great care has been taken to include extensive images of urban plans, architecture, space, and monuments in each chapter, not simply to illustrate major points being made but as integral components of the author's overall argument. Historians and others increasingly interested in the photographic representation of Latin America will find not only an extensive trove of images but also an important model of how they might be used to inform their own analysis.

In short, this volume represents an important contribution to not only the history of urban planning but to the task of conceptualizing the relationship between Europe and Latin America during this critical time.

William French
Department of History
University of British Columbia