

Klemek, Christopher. *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 315 pages. Photographs, appendix, notes, index.

Will Langford

Volume 41, numéro 2, spring 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015386ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015386ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Langford, W. (2013). Compte rendu de [Klemek, Christopher. *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 315 pages. Photographs, appendix, notes, index.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 41 (2), 51–52.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1015386ar>

L'architecte cherche une prise sur le concret que lui offre l'analyse typo morphologique ou de la syntaxe spatiale.

L'analyse de morphologie géographique et historique, directement inspirée par les travaux de Ritchot et Pelletier, exprime un désir de reconnaître l'unicité d'un lieu, dans sa forme et ses mythes. L'approche est déconcertante; elle apparaît comme une astrologie des états d'âme, tel un horoscope structuraliste qui propose de baliser notre aventure individuelle et collective.

Sur ce point, l'analyse typo morphologique insiste davantage sur le phénomène de récurrence et de répétitions pour mieux saisir la nature des éléments singuliers ou exceptionnels. Reconnaître ce qui se répète et se reproduit de manière directe ou dérivée signifie prendre une mesure de la concrétisation matérielle des mythes, idéaux et modèles qui animent une société. Le projet urbain pose certes l'existence d'alternatives explorées verbalement ou graphiquement, mais celui réalisé matérialise les intérêts et les aspirations des acteurs de chaque époque, dans une mise en contexte locale et internationale considérant la vocation coloniale de la ville. Les longues hypothèses sur le choix du site de Québec et le fantôme urbain de Ludovica semblent perdre l'enjeu récurrent de la modestie des moyens du projet colonial européen, français ou britannique, jusqu'au début du XIX^e siècle.

En effet, tout le long du volume la question revient en boucle. En quoi le développement de Québec, comme comptoir commercial dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle, de ville coloniale française jusqu'en 1759, de ville coloniale britannique jusqu'au départ des troupes en 1871 et comme ville nord-américaines depuis est-il pareil ou différent des modèles et pratiques établis dans chacun de ses contextes culturels, économiques et sociaux?

Je crois aussi que l'analyse, en prenant le parti d'être morphologique, doit se fonder avant tout sur les observations objectives que représentent les formes d'une ville; la topographie et le réseau hydrographique, le cadastre rural et urbain, la nature des emprises au sol du bâti. Ces éléments non seulement se reconnaissent par des caractéristiques formelles — un tracé, un pourtour, des dimensions —, mais aussi une position relative avec les autres éléments. De manière presque prosaïque, l'analyse morphologique est un travail d'observation documentaire. Cette dimension factuelle peut donner un autre sens aux récits et commentaires des générations d'auteurs invoqués; entre francophones et anglophones sur le sens de l'histoire du pays, entre Britannique et Américains sur le destin du continent, sur les diverses générations d'intellectuels québécois cherchant une issue individuelle et collective entre célébrer la tradition puis la modernité.

En ce sens, le livre est un avertissement sur la difficulté de faire de l'histoire urbaine lorsqu'il faut comparer les discours de perceptions et d'aspirations avec ce qui est effectivement construit. L'histoire de la forme urbaine au Québec ou au Canada reste à écrire afin de baliser les aventures de chaque ville et village. Ce cadre devra prendre compte de ce qui s'est fait, ce qui a disparu, ce qui ne s'est pas réalisé ou plus encore jamais

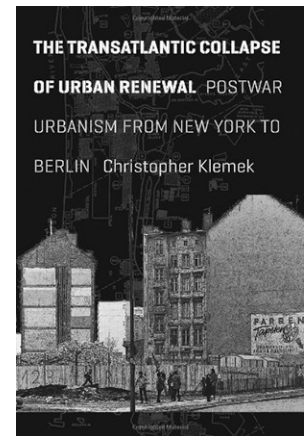
complété. Ce caractère inachevé est peut être un des facteurs récurrents de l'histoire urbaine au Québec, c'est-à-dire l'adéquation imparfaite entre les mythes, les modèles, les moyens et les motivations humaines dans une société à la périphérie des empires économiques et culturels auxquels elle se croit rattachée et dépendante.

François Dufaux
Professeur à l'École d'architecture de l'Université Laval

Klemek, Christopher. *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 315 pages. Photographs, appendix, notes, index.

Christopher Klemek's first book fleshes out the transnational character of the postwar modernist vision of urbanism in a concrete and detailed fashion. Urban historians, and planning historians especially, have long understood intuitively that postwar urban ideas, institutions, politics, and policies on both sides of the Atlantic were related. In general, though, studies of urban renewal have focused on a single city, on national developments or narrowly on planning ideology. But here, in extending the well-known transatlantic analysis of Daniel Rodgers to the postwar period, Klemek probes the common influences and connections evident in urban debates in the United States, Germany, Britain, and Canada with depth, insight, and clarity. It is an important contribution. As the book's title suggests, the trajectory of the narrative is about the unmaking of the urban renewal consensus in the face of criticism and popular protest in the 1950s and 1960s. Klemek's central thesis is that while urban policy in each of these four countries converged in the postwar years, "the local particularities of each urban policy crisis transformed the possibilities of the planning and yielded disparate outcomes in those places for the rest of the twentieth century" (6). In advancing this argument, he makes a case that even in the context of transatlantic ideas and forces, local politics mattered.

One of the key aspects of Klemek's work is that he gives a new name to the hegemonic urban paradigm of the mid-twentieth century: urban renewal order. He argues that, from the 1930s through the 1960s, this order was marked by a taste for modernist architecture, the professionalization of urban experts, the increased involvement of federal government in urban affairs due to the demographic dominance of cities, and the prevalence of ambitious redevelopment schemes increasingly advanced by "local public entrepreneurs" in municipal administrations (19). These insights are not original, but thinking in terms of an urban renewal order is particularly useful for understanding,



comparatively, the ways in which postwar urbanism so neatly aligned on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, Klemek argues that parallel urban renewal orders were “rapidly built into a seemingly edifice on the political landscape” in each of the places he discusses (20). The bulk of the monograph chronicles the unraveling of this consensus in the face of criticism from within the urbanist establishment, from the social sciences, and from citizen outsiders like Jane Jacobs.

As he makes clear at the outset, Klemek’s primary concern is with American urban history. He uses the experiences of Germany, Britain, and Canada as a way to inform an understanding of American urbanism. In the end, he builds a case for American exceptionalism. Popular protest against urban renewal, freeways, and technocratic planning gave rise to New Left advocacy planning, but also to an overpowering neoconservative backlash that prompted the U.S. federal government to completely withdraw from urban policy in the 1970s (214-216). The total collapse of urban renewal order in the United States led to a new and overpowering paradigm of urban crisis. Conversely, in Berlin, confidence in urban renewal remained unshaken in the 1970s, with criticisms resulting in a more “gentle” approach to renewal that emphasized traditional cityscapes. In London, New Left planners increasingly turned to working cooperatively with community groups before the Thatcher government eventually curtailed planning efforts for ideological reasons (177).

Of particular interest to Canadian historians, the experiences of Toronto emerge in the latter stages of the book as Klemek’s most important foil. He argues that popular protest in Toronto against urban renewal order produced neither a conservative backlash, nor short-lived experiments with advocacy planning. Rather, civic democracy was invigorated and a citywide, cross-class reform movement took hold of municipal politics and institutionalized a pro-planning New Left urbanism (15, 219). He suggests that this was the product of a receptive Canadian political climate, where people with divergent ideas and impulses could still find ways to work together (220). Canadian historians have previously come to similar conclusions about the reform coalition in Toronto, but Klemek’s insights into the uniqueness of the tenor of Canadian urban politics and debates are striking when set within a transatlantic framework. If he has intent on making a case for American exceptionalism, he also succeeds in making a convincing one for Canadian exceptionalism.

Klemek is the leading authority on Jane Jacobs and she is a key and dynamic figure in this narrative. One of the most compelling sections of the book concerns how Jacobs’ famed critique of modernist urbanism was received in very divergent ways in the four countries in focus. That Jacobs moved to Toronto and became embroiled in the city’s anti-freeway protests explains why Canada is included in Klemek’s narrative at all, though. Indeed, in the early sections of the book, where Jacobs is not a central figure and the aforementioned “Canada-as-foil” dynamic is not as strong, the Canadian context disappears from view. This is disappointing in one regard in particular. Klemek pays close attention to how ideas were formed, transmitted, and challenged

in important and extended discussions of American, German, and British urban intellectuals and educational institutions. But he does not extend this analysis to the Canadian sphere much beyond his focus on Jacobs. He suggests that Canada’s permissive postwar immigration policies attracted many German and British planners, who in turn shaped Canadian urban policy (42). But, aside from a short discussion of German-Canadian planner Hans Blumenfeld, this influence is never explored. If Canada was importing people from elsewhere, what was their impact and how were ideas changed in the Canadian context? For instance, planning schools were just being formed at Canadian universities in the postwar years Klemek discusses. What ideas did these new programs incorporate and with what consequences? These considerations, so carefully covered in relation to the U.S., Germany, and Britain, go wanting with respect to Canada.

For understandable methodological reasons, Klemek’s book deals in historical synecdoche. Berlin stands for Germany, London for Britain, and Toronto for Canada. He extends his American analysis further, to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. This approach does not detract from Klemek’s fine work, but it does open other possible avenues for comparative histories. For example, was the Toronto experience the typical Canadian one? Certainly, there were many similarities in the 1960s and 1970s political developments in Toronto and Vancouver, especially. But the fate of urban renewal order across Canada deserves careful consideration. Undoubtedly, Danielle Robinson’s in-progress McMaster dissertation on anti-freeway protests across Canada will go some way to providing a more concrete comparative analysis.

Canadian historians should also consider seriously the implications of Klemek’s central contention that the particularities of local politics are key to understanding the history of postwar urbanism. He argues that the clear divergences in the experiences of the four nations he examines can be explained by their different political cultures. He goes on to say that, “since national character and political culture are such abstract, intangible entities – although no less real for being so – I have been content to suggest their presence indirectly, rather than attempt to conjure such elusive spirits into my analysis” (241). This explanation feels a bit unsatisfactory. What of this Canadian national character and political culture? Can we link the success of Canadian urban reform movements to the mutability and flexibility of the Liberal Order Framework that Ian McKay argues underlies Canada’s national political project? Or is there something more tangible about the way that politics were conducted in 1960s Canadian cities that helps explain the Canadian exceptionalism Klemek uncovers in his book? In light of Canada’s distinctive place in the transatlantic collapse of urban renewal order, these are questions that deserve further inquiry.

Will Langford
University of British Columbia