Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Some Reflections on a Conference on the Historical Urbanization of North America

David B. Knight et John Clarke

Numéro 1-73, may 1973

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020587ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1020587ar

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 cet article

Knight, D. B. & Clarke, J. (1973). Some Reflections on a Conference on the Historical Urbanization of North America. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (1-73), 10–14. https://doi.org/10.7202/1020587ar

SOME REFLECTIONS ON A CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORICAL URBANIZATION OF NORTH AMERICA

It was refreshing and stimulating to be able to attend the conference at York University, January 24-26, 1973, with historians, historical geographers, and others, to discuss research problems and findings involved with the theme of historical urbanization in North America.

More than two hundred people from Canada, United States and Britain attended the conference which was arranged and organized by a committee of geographers and historians chaired by Professor Roy Merrens (Geography, York).

Several sessions, which attempted to focus on particular themes, were organized. These themes were (1) sources and methods of urban research, (2) the role of the city in nineteenth century North America, (3) internal relationships within nineteenth century cities, (4) urbanization in the colonial era of North America, (5) regional variations in North American urbanization, and (6) residential change within North American cities. In addition, there was an introductory debate on "Toronto's Past - Does it Matter?," a concluding plea for "And What About the Twentieth Century?" by Professor John Marshall (Geography, York), and two very pleasant receptions, and some displays, including a small but effective one from the Map Division of the Public Archives of Canada.

As Table I shows, a not unexpected majority of papers came from people with institutional affiliations in the United States. Of the geographers giving papers about one half were from Canadian departments, but the majority of the historians were American based. At times members of the audience could perhaps have been forgiven for feeling that the conference was for Americans and by Americans, and that somehow a Canadian delegation had strayed into the wrong theatre. The "American presence" was evident in the delivery of several participants who, though removed in absolute space from their homeland, nevertheless remained firmly within its mental boundaries. It was

also seen in the assumption by some writers that American models fitted Canadian reality. The present writers are not as certain that the phenomena of urbanism and urbanization can transcend the political and cultural boundary with impunity. In saying this, we are the first to acknowledge that similar processes have often operated in and on Canadian and United States cities. However, we would hasten to add that one must examine spatial and temporal urban growth within the socio-economic and political framework of the regions under study.

In only one instance, out of thirty papers presented, was there direct collaboration between an historian and an historical geographer - Professor Ronald Hoffman (History) and Professor Carville Earl (Geography) - both of the University of Maryland. Some other papers formed part of interdisciplinary projects, however, as with Mr. Michael Doucet (Geography, Toronto) and the Hamilton social history project and Professor Ted Hershberg (History, University of Pennsylvania) and the Philadelphia social history project.

TABLE I

Readers of Papers and Session Chairmen
by Institutional Affiliation and Discipline

	Canadian Institutions		United States Institutions		Totals by Discipline
	Reader	Chairman	Reader	Chairman	
History	3*	3	9½**	-	15½
Geography	7	1	8½**	2	18½
Architectural History	-	-	1	-	1
Historical Archeology	-	-	1	-	1
Totals by Institutional Affiliation	10	4	20	2	36

* Includes one paper shared by two people.

** '½' represents a shared paper.

Several related themes or questions were found in different papers. For instance, Professor James Vance (Geography, Berkeley), speaking on classical and medieval cities, and Gilbert Stelter (History, Laurentian), reviewing Canadian urban history to 1850, both concluded, from different points of view and evidence, that the late eighteenth and nineteenth North American cities did not "grow out of the countryside" and that cities did not come late, as many scholars have concluded. How many Canadian "histories" have assumed the latter?

Some papers focussed on the large urban centres and their areal influence. In this vein, Professors Michael Conzen (Geography, Boston University) and Louise Dechêne (History, McGill) added to our knowledge of some external aspects of New York and Montreal respectively. Reflecting Professor Grant Head's (Geography, McMaster) concern that too much focus has been placed on the large urban centres (although his concern was specifically for the colonial era), several researchers gave papers on the smaller urban places such as Jackson, Illinois (Professor Don Doyle, History, University of Michigan at Dearborn), or on regional growth patterns, as with the well-developed paper on the Middle Ohio Valley, 1800-1860 (Professor Edward Muller, Geography, Maryland) and the explorative paper on the Ante-Bellum South as an anomaly in the total United States urban system (Professor Bruce La Rose, Geography, Briarcliffe College). Other papers concentrated on particular themes such as the role of municipal government in the development of the Toronto waterfront (Professor Francis Mellon, Geography, Ryerson College), and the influence of the automobile on the enlargement and alteration of Phoenix's physical "Urban frame" (Professor Charles Sargent, Geography, Arizona State).

Dealing with the internal social structure of cities, Professor Kathleen Conzen (History, Wellesley College) suggested from her work on early Milwaukee that we should consider the "ethnic community" in addition to the "ghetto." Professor Ted Hershberg (History, University of Pennsylvania), in examining ethnic residential patterns from Philadelphia's 1880 census, suggested that it was possible to numerically identify the spatial patterns of neighbourhoods.

However, several people in the audience objected, saying that surely "neighbourhoods" are largely matters of the mind, a point echoed in Professor Edward Kopf's (History, Brandeis) paper on the "Old Neighbourhood." And so it went, with other papers as well, on various places, themes, or regions.

The methods used in the papers, or suggested for future study, varied widely, but included techniques of oral history, traditional reviews of the literature, a poorly received classification by personality types, three dimensional computer mapping and a number of forms of multivariate analysis. With respect to the last named, the Canadian reader will be interested in Mr. Doucet's factorial ecology of Hamilton, Ontario, in 1851.

It is curious that so many of the participants who exhibited marked competence in terms of method and approach in their papers, should have presented their material so poorly. Little use was made of maps and when maps were used inadequate numbers of copies were provided. Small maps, or charts taped on a board, were of little use to members of the audience sitting near the middle or back of an auditorium designed to hold up to 300 people. Although projection equipment was available, it was little used. Students would not stand for such teaching incompetence; why should conference participants be treated so shabbily.

At one of the opening sessions to the conference, Professor Peter Goheen (Geography, University of Chicago) stated that there is no adequate theory of the modern (American) city and he suggested that "within the confusion of competitive concept and definition there is no agreement on what is fundamental and what is consequential." If participants in the conference had hoped to be led to a clearer identity of theory by being present at the sessions, then they surely must have been disappointed. Nevertheless, even with the great diversity of themes and particular topics, communication did occur with some "unique" isolated studies becoming "case" studies illustrating interrelated processes, unsolved problems becoming more solvable, some loose thinking and writing being shaken by sharp comments, and isolated ideas becoming shared ideas.

There was not always complete acceptance of what was being said. For example, some of the papers stressed the "unique" while others were striving for the "general." Because of this, participants sometimes felt either that a few papers were "trivial" because of their detail or that they left the realm of "reality" by generalizing too much. A matter of point of view? Certainly, it was clear that all of interest to some historians may not be of interest to some geographers, and vice versa. These differences of interest should be noted and accepted without value judgments or complaint. Equally so, areas of overlap should be further identified so that increased cross-disciplinary communication and investigation can take place.

As indicated earlier, only one paper at the conference was presented by joint authors who have different skills. Hopefully, their successful example of collaboration will be copied by others, so that the next conference on "historical urbanization of North America" will be even more successful. Above all, however, we agree with Professor Gilbert Stelter in the hope that the increased new interest in historical urban studies "will lead to a combination of the analytical rigor of the social sciences with the humanistic concern for what is unique and particular in time and place." The first conference on "Historical Urbanization in North America" was most worthwhile since it brought researchers with different point of view and skills together.

David B. Knight

John Clarke