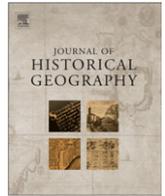


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Class cities: Classics, utopianism and urban planning in early twentieth-century Britain

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Abstract

This article examines the intellectual background to debates in the town planning movement in early twentieth-century Britain. The movement drew heavily on two traditions, that of the anarchists, who provided much of the theory, and that of the philanthropists. The reception of the Classical city influenced these debates through the provision of key paradigms. These paradigms were predominantly sociological rather than architectural and related to the 'ideal' societies to be generated by the new cities. The article argues that urban planning followed a path parallel to British sociology in adopting Classical ideas and forming itself around particular Classicising imaginings of society. Whereas the anarchist tradition exploited the Classical cautiously, differentiating the cities of Rome from the Classical *poleis* of Greece and finding in those Greek traditions the possibility of radical associative democracy, town planners in the British tradition came to engage with the Classical in a very different way. Through figures such as Patrick Geddes, the influence of Classicism served to divest British urban planning of its political radicalism and the Classical *polis* was used to offer a utopianism which was hierarchical and conservative.

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In 1910, the year after town planning became a statutory duty in Britain, the Camden Professor of Ancient History, Francis Haverfield, delivered a lecture to the inaugural meeting of the Town Planning Association.¹ Haverfield's contribution was such a success that an extended version, *Ancient Town Planning*, was published 3 years later, a book which is notable for its numerous plans and which is part of a recognisable genre of ancient topographical studies. The emphasis on plans represents the city as a work of art and as an expression of a particular form of culture, though Haverfield does not acknowledge the complexity of the link between sociology and built form.² While there is little in Haverfield's account that explicitly recognises contemporary concerns, his emphasis on formal architectural elements, especially monumental architecture, and his lack of concern with housing has much in common with the city-improvement movements of the nineteenth century, such as the City Beautiful movement of Chicago,

and the work of influential German urban thinkers, such as Wagner and Sitte.³

Town planning from the chair: the Camden professor and the city

The very presence of the Camden professor at this inaugural meeting suggests a link between Classical urban thought and the nascent town planning movement. Haverfield was defending the relevance of his discipline in the early twentieth century, just as the town planners were acknowledging a prestigious historical pedigree to their art. In retrospect an alliance between a Roman historian and the planning profession might seem uncontroversial, especially as Roman archaeology provided the largest repertoire of known planned cities available for study. Yet the relationship between Classical urban models and the designs of the town

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¹ F. Haverfield, Town planning in the Roman world, *Town Planning Review* (1910) 123–132.

² F. Haverfield, *Ancient Town Planning*, Oxford, 1913. The concept of urban morphology is first fully expressed in R. Maunier, *L'Origine et la Fonction économique des Villes (Étude de morphologie sociale)*, Paris, 1910, especially, 9–10, in which Maunier argues that material (*choses*) and environment (*habitat*) determine society, though there was clearly an earlier assumption of such a link. Haverfield's approach remains influential in Classical studies, see for example E.J. Owens, *The City in the Greek and Roman World*, London, 1991; A. Segal, *From Function to Monument: Urban Landscapes of Roman Palestine, Syria and Provincial Arabia*, Oxford, 1997, and C. Gates, *The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome*, London and New York, 2003.

³ See C. Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City*, Chicago and London, 2006; J. Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893*, Chicago and London, 1991. The city as work of art was central to the conceptions of the city in O. Wagner, *Modern Architecture* (trans by H.T. Mallgrave), Santa Monica, 1988, 1st Edition 1896], and C. Sitte, *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Wien, 1889.

planners was far from straightforward. Haverfield's contribution was, in fact, contentious, though his sententiousness was, typically, buried under the weight of evidence he presented. His championing of the Classical form, and in particular Roman urbanism, was in marked contrast with the explicit anti-Classicism of the early British town planning movement.

That tension was reflected in architecture. Whereas some of the most prominent examples of nineteenth-century planning, as in St Petersburg, New Delhi, and Washington or the grand urban remodelling of the Haussmann tradition, referenced Classical precursors within a Baroque or a neo-Classical style, British urban planners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were drawn to different architectural traditions. In particular, they looked to the legacy of model villages, ranging from Milton Abbas in 1780 through experimental settlements such as Robert Owen's socialistic settlement at New Lanark (1799 and later), and industrial villages such as Titus Salt's Saltaire (c.1860) and the Cadbury village at Bournville (c.1900). All these settlements adopted different versions of the contemporary vernacular or, as in the development of Port Sunlight (1899 and later), referenced Morris' Arts and Crafts movement and English neo-Medievalism.⁴ This preferred architectural style was, I shall argue, a positive ideological statement which distanced the town planners from both Victorian civic improvers (with their neo-Classical obsessions) and imperial urban forms, contemporary and ancient.

Raymond Unwin's influential *Town Planning in Practice* (1909) offered the 'German model' as the paradigm for British town planning, building particularly on Horsfall's *The Improvement of the Dwellings and Surroundings of the People: The Example of Germany* (1904).⁵ Observing a fundamental division between what he described as 'formalism' and 'informalism' (by which he meant Classicism and Medievalism) and conscious as he was of the history of urban development and the Classical roots of town planning, Unwin made very little use of Classical forms, preferring 'informalism' in his urban environments.⁶

Paradoxically, the German works on which Unwin and others drew, notably Camillo Sitte's *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* of 1889 and Otto Wagner's *Modern Architecture* of 1896 were far from hostile to Classical models in and of themselves (though both called for architectures appropriate to the particular Modern environment). Otto Wagner took a somewhat more architectural perspective, railing against mismatched appropriations of previous architectural styles unsuited to the spirit of the modern age.⁷ The *zeitgeist* was to be manifest in architecture as in other aspects of cultural life and architectural conservatism and the reinvention of architectural forms from a previous age (as in neo-Classicism) was to be avoided. There was, thus, an explicit link between the age (modernity) and the most appropriate architectural forms (modern) which carried within it an assumed sociology. Sitte meanwhile focused his ire on 'modern systems', by which he

meant building in blocks, high degrees of symmetry, and monumental gigantism, calling for an architecture that emerged in nature and a monumentality that honoured an urban morphology that developed through a 'natural' use of space by the community. Sitte looked for monuments and spaces being created through an evolutionary process and he in fact praised the ancient city since it emerged *in natura* and not from drawing boards.

The active anti-Classicism of some of the British town planners was thus distinctive. As Lilley has shown, the favoured neo-medievalism of the planners looked rather to Ruskin and the Victorian neo-Medievalists. Neo-medievalism had a particular aesthetic value which was in considerable contrast to the visions of the city offered by Haussmann and his ilk, which were surely the primary targets of Wagner and Sitte. It was also a view that was in marked contrast to the approach taken by many on the continent and which was to find its most powerful spokesman in the modernism of Le Corbusier.⁸ Yet, the debate was not just aesthetic, but political. The architecture carried within it a related vision of society, one in which the new cities were to generate different social forms from those which had grown up in the industrial cities of the nineteenth century. The adoption of neo-Medieval forms further differentiated these putative new societies from the Classical: the societies to be reinvented were not the imperial societies of the Roman world.

Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Town Planning Association in 1910, Haverfield threw considerable academic weight into this discussion of social forms, favouring a Classical model over the Medieval. He asserted that 'the square and the straight lines are indeed the simplest marks which divide man civilised from the barbarian. It has remained for the Teutonic spirit in these last days to connect civilisation with a curve'.⁹ Haverfield's ironic reference to the 'Teutonic spirit' points to the Germanic bent of Unwin's and Sitte's plans, but also to the utopian curves of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and perhaps to the hexagons of Inigo Triggs.¹⁰ This oppositional stance is also reflected in Haverfield's insistence that no Roman city could have been a garden city, in spite of contemporary evidence from archaeological excavations that cities such as Silchester were far from densely occupied.¹¹ Haverfield's image of the city was ideologically loaded. For Haverfield, in a traditional view that can be traced back at least to Tacitus' *Agricola* in the early first-century AD, cities were at the beneficent heart of Roman imperialism.¹² He thus writes of the value of Roman town planning:

It increased the comfort of the common man; it made the towns stronger and more coherent units to resist the barbarian invasions. When, after 250 years of conflict, the barbarians triumphed, its work was done.¹³

In the light of the generally pacific history of Roman Britain, which would have been well known to Haverfield as the foremost contemporary expert in the history and archaeology of Roman Britain, we must understand the barbarians at the gate not as those

⁴ See I. Donnachie, Utopian designs: the Owenite communities, *Spaces of Utopia* 6 (2007) 19–34, and the hagiography of Salt in R. Baggott, *Sir Titus Salt: His Life and Lessons*, London, 1877.

⁵ R. Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs*, London, Leipsic, 1909, 3–10; 110–114.

⁶ Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice* (note 5), 110–14; 27–72.

⁷ C. Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities: City Building according to its Artistic Fundamentals* (trans by C.T. Stewart), New York, 1945, 1–68; Wagner, *Modern Architecture* (note 3).

⁸ K.D. Lilley, Modern visions of the Medieval city: Competing conceptions of urbanism in European civic design, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 26 (1999) 427–466.

⁹ Haverfield, *Town planning in the Roman world* (note 1), 124.

¹⁰ H. Inigo Triggs, *Town Planning: Past, Present and Possible*, London, 1909, 112–118.

¹¹ Haverfield, *Town planning in the Roman world* (note 1), 127–129.

¹² P.W.M. Freeman, *The Best Training Ground for Archaeologists: Francis Haverfield and the Invention of Romano-British Archaeology*, Oxford, 2007, 334–370, dismisses attempts to uncover the ideological context of Haverfield's work, such as R. Laurence, Modern ideology and the creation of ancient town planning, *European Review of History* 1 (1994) 9–18. See R. Alston, Conquest by text: Juvenal and Plutarch on Egypt, in: N. Cooper, J. Webster (Eds), *Roman Imperialism: Post-colonial Perspectives* (Leicester University Archaeology Monographs, 3), Leicester, 1996, 99–109, for an attempt to establish a political context for Haverfield's views of imperial culture.

¹³ Haverfield, *Ancient Town Planning* (note 2), 140.

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