

CONFERENCE REPORT

European Association for Urban History Conference, ‘Inequality and the city’, Antwerp, 31 August – 3 September 2022

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After two years of postponements, the 15th meeting of the European Association for Urban History took place in Antwerp, Belgium, in September 2022. The pandemic was not the only obstacle that the conference organizers had to overcome, as a fire two months before the conference started sadly made several buildings unusable. It is a great testament to the organizational skills and tenacity of Peter Stabel, the other members of the organizing committee and staff and students at the University of Antwerp that the conference happened at all.

The central theme of EAUH 2020 was due to be on motion and the city. However, because of postponements, an additional call for papers was issued on the theme of inequality and the city, a prescient topic given that the pandemic demonstrated distinct types of inequalities across the world. As such, the conference had a large thematic spread, with main sessions, specialist panels and panels on inequality. There was also a wide geographic spread, with papers covering traditional areas of dominance in urban history such as North America and Western Europe, as well as Eastern Europe, Asia and Australasia. The comparative absence of papers on African and South American cities was notable. With such a wide spread of papers, it was difficult to discern common themes across the entirety of the conference; however, several issues and topics did emerge.

There was a pleasing number of papers that touched on urban-environmental issues, from how disasters were explained and conceptualized in early modern Japan and China to the creation of leisure parks and the literal reshaping of Denmark’s coastline in the 1970s. Urban-environmental history, of course, is nothing new. However, in engaging with concepts like urban citizenship, leisure and culture as well as urban infrastructure, urban historians are producing more holistic narratives of the urban environment. While there were several papers on the environment, there was surprisingly little work on urban sexuality. This was, perhaps, a result of the central themes chosen for the conference; while motion and inequality could fit into histories of sexuality, especially the latter, there was a more traditional approach taken to the themes. Of the 19 panels on inequality, only one focused on sexuality, while several focused on social inequalities or the inequalities of the urban environment. Hopefully, future conferences will include more history of the urban LGBTQ+ experience, especially given the difficulties

and dangers many queer and non-binary people are currently facing around the world.

The keynote lectures helped to situate attendees both in the city of Antwerp itself and in developing methodological debates. Hilde Greefs' keynote spoke to the continued importance of studying urban migration, using Antwerp as a case-study. As a port city, Antwerp has been no stranger to waves of migration over its history, a point handily reinforced by the literature provided by the organizers in the conference pack. Utilizing GIS (Geographic Information Systems or digital maps), Greefs showed the impact of migration on the transformation of the city. Tim Hitchcock continued with the use of digital history to ask how urban history might be advanced with the help of digital methods. His use of the Old Bailey Online database, a cornerstone of digital crime history, as well as 3D rendering of objects and courtrooms, provoked interesting discussion about its application for further exploring urban space. Given the difficulties of the past two years with access to archives restricted, many of the attendees will have experienced their own digital turn, so the reflections of Greefs and Hitchcock on digital methods were timely.

One theme that did emerge across several panels was the extent to which the boundaries of the city exist. This is also not a new question for urban historians to ponder, but the number of times that an unease with the fluid boundaries of the modern city was expressed was striking. Many classical, medieval and pre-modern cities in Europe, of course, were clearly defined with walls and gates, a theme that was reiterated during Daniel Jütte's keynote lecture. Jütte, though, also highlighted the inequalities that existed with this gated status – who was allowed into the pre-modern city? So questions around the permeability of city boundaries have existed since before the modern period. Similarly, the question of city boundaries and limits was raised during the closing plenary session on urban theory and urban history – how can we theoretically approach the city if we do not know where the city starts and ends? Interestingly, this may be a question that urban-environmental historians are more comfortable with, given the long-recognized environmental impact of cities far beyond their municipal boundaries. Indeed, with the growth of concepts like planetary urbanism, as well as the success of global urban history, this question will not be going away any time soon.

In amongst the continuing difficulties presented by COVID-19 and other issues, it was a great delight to make it to the conference, a feeling shared with colleagues across the world as we gathered for the first time in over two years. Although many were not able to make it due to the postponements, the attendance of several hundred colleagues is a testament to the state of urban history on an international scale. Many will have left eagerly awaiting the next meeting of EAUH in Ostrava, Czech Republic, in 2024.

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