REVIEW ARTICLE

Investigating European Cities in the Modern Age through the Lens of the Global Urban History Approach.

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Rosemary Wakeman,
A Modern History of European Cities: 1815 to the Present
(London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 392 (hb), £72.00, ISBN 9781350017665.

Miles Glendinning,
Mass Housing: Modern Architecture and State Power – A Global History
(London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 688 (hb), £76.50, ISBN 9781474229272.

Andrew Demshuk,
Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany
(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 272 (hb), $39.95, ISBN 9781501751660.

Łukasz Stanek,
Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 368 (hb), £48.00, ISBN 9780691168708.

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This review article focuses on two key developments in urban history. The first is that the new transnational approach to urban history is significantly advancing the field and the second is that within the European context an important new emphasis is being placed on Eastern and Southern Europe. As claimed by Claus Møller Jørgensen in his review of nineteenth-century transnational urban history:

> transnational urban history entails a measure of comparative work to find commonalities as hints of connections . . . The enlargement of scale and the search for connections does add new perspectives to urban history and produces new knowledge . . . Focusing on cities as the location of transnational processes of modernity brings urban place more centrally into discussions of national space and national histories.[1]

It was in the nineteenth century, at the peak of the Industrial Revolution, that planning emerged to drive architectural projects and solve critical urban emergencies across European cities.[2] As a consequence, planning as a discipline has constituted a sort of springboard for scholarly research on European cities also in the twentieth century.[3] Yet, as the consortium of researchers involved in the 2016–2021 European Joint Doctorate 'urbanHist'[4] have argued, while prioritising a small number of national perspectives, mainstream urban historiography has mostly ignored the majority of European countries and relevant characters in the history of this discipline. Although planning has developed as a European field of practice and scientific discipline, much of the historiography has trained its focus too much on the same three or four major cities, thereby obscuring how much sharing went on across borders, and not just in the largest or richest European nations.

Also under-researched has been the role that urban planning has played as a resource to empower dictatorships in the twentieth century, or as a vehicle to homogenise the development of urbanised areas.[5] Social and economic progress in Europe but also dictatorships' brutal treatment of the existing built environment were possible due to the use of urban planning. For instance, the Fascist regime in Italy embraced the formula of demolition in order to clear the surroundings of ancient monuments. This allowed it to construct the Fascist identity around a network of new monumental buildings and surrounding spaces.[6] As a corrective, this pan-European 'urbanHist' network proposes a transnational approach based on research that studies and compares Western and Eastern Europe across the modern era.

The four books under analysis show the potential for the kind of transnational research path advocated by urbanHist. Chiefly, these works steer away from the national 'country-by-country' treatment, instead illustrating common approaches designed to tackle common problems shared by modernising societies. The pay-off of this approach is that Urban History begins to look less like one more iteration of the Great Man version of history, within which individuals such as Louis Napoleon and Baron Hausmann play the starring roles. Instead, readers can appreciate how a wider range of administrators

sought to tackle common technological, demographic and hygienic possibilities and challenges. Despite dealing with slightly different themes, these books **[Q3]** therefore enrich a discussion about the evolution of Western and Eastern European cities in the last century. They also show that cities could be both the products of transnational techniques and technologies, and a powerful means to project the power of the states within which they were located.

The first book by Rosemary Wakeman analyses European cities and towns, asking whether the patterns of development that have shaped the modern urban landscape are indelibly European. This book underscores the tradition of governance that guided modernisation and urban development across Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By 'tradition of governance', Wakeman refers to that public management and regulation, whether in the mixed public–private planning programmes in Western cities or in the cities under socialism, which distinguished urban development in Europe. However, she is also bringing the development of urban regions and the web of medium and small towns, even villages, into the dialogue about European urban life. What counted (and was part of the deep structural unity in the European urban experience the book identifies) was that the mix of public–private planning or socialist planning was pioneered in Europe because capitalism and socialism emerged first in this continent.

Steering away from static categories of 'Eastern', 'Northern', 'Southern' and 'Western' Europe, as well as of capitalist and socialist cities, the writer focuses on six main commonalities, first identified in *Cities in Contemporary Europe*[7] the stability and longevity of European urban systems; the density and compactness of the urban fabrics; the complex sociopolitical structure; the heritage of political independence; the shared morphology of urban growth; and the strong tradition of town planning. Wakeman's writing tries to reshape the discussion in the field of urban history by borrowing from a framework first laid out in 2000 by the aforementioned Patrick LeGalès and Arnaldo Bagnasco. This framework claims that one of the most distinctive features of European cities was the relative stability of the European urban system even though, over time, individual cities rose and fell in importance, grew or shrank because of social and economic dislocation and, more generally, Mediterranean cities gave way to the cities of northern Europe in terms of providing the most famous models.

As a consequence, this book reshapes the discussion of European cities, avoiding the trap of imagining Eastern Europe as separate and remote from the rest of Europe. Yet, there is less novelty in what Wakeman is doing because, for instance, she does not compare European cities to North or South American counterparts: this kind of work may have reinforced the author's claim for a distinctively 'European' urban history. The book certainly has the merit of highlighting how European elites that managed to stay in power supported modernisation and industrialisation, large-scale infrastructure programmes, public housing and social agenda, such as the nineteenth-century boulevards[8] or the twentieth-century modernist housing estates.[9] However, her claims about Europeanness are ultimately a summary of what happened in Europe since 1815.

Covering the period from the early nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, Wakeman is able to show how European cities emerged as the primary laboratories for modernity. For instance, by incorporating Eastern and Southern Europe more concretely into the fabric of urban history, the writer states that the global patterns of trade and migration, and global knowledge and information transfer were more complex and began earlier than Western Europe-oriented scholars have originally envisioned. Existing studies typically relate to British, French and German colonialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries,[10] but cities in Eastern and Southern Europe were global gateways to the Mediterranean, the East and beyond early in the nineteenth century.

A wide-lens look at urban geography across Europe underscores immigration and the mixing of ethnic groups as one of the most significant features of European cities. The melting pot of Europe has a long historical trajectory when seen from this perspective. The added significance of this fact is that cities ended up looking different because they were connected to trade networks that stretched across the globe. For instance, the manufacture and trade in goods, food products and luxury items were dispersed across villages, towns and cities in the Balkans or in the Polish territories of the Russian Empire. Urban systems were multi-scaled from local networks to the global ties of trade and empire. This kind of global integration did not necessarily await the arrival of industrialisation, railroads and modern infrastructure, although these clearly had relevant impacts on both time and space. This fact means that the transfers and networks of information, ideas and culture pulsated through European territories in more complex ways than scholars have suggested. The flow of information, travel and culture between the Ottoman, Russian and Hapsburg empires created rich, hybrid urban places, with a frontier of borderland complexity that was international as well as local. This research therefore generates a better understanding of the European city by looking at the spectrum of relations across European urban systems.

Among the achievements of this book, Wakeman illustrates the structural unity of the European urban experience alongside the pluralities and discontinuities evidenced in cities, and the multiple regional forms that urban modernity has taken. As a result, Wakeman has brought into sharper focus the common patterns discernible in European urban history from the nineteenth century onwards but her claims – and this may be the next step for future researchers – should be supported by

comparisons with non-European countries or even continents.

The second book – Miles Glendinning's *Mass Housing* – reflects on state-sponsored homes for lower-income citizens, especially in tall apartment blocks. The period of study goes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards to make the reader understand that most of these dwellings built in the twentieth century did not simply follow early patterns but had to be radically redesigned in order to respond to urgent political and economic pressures. Their impressive built form broke sharply from the old patterns of the nineteenth century, under the revolutionary influence of the architectural Modern Movement. According to the writer,[11] the Modern Movement was a transnational force spreading an 'architectural ideology which combined an almost Leninist scientific authoritarianism, rooted in rationalist efficiency doctrines, with the poetic, prophetic writings and designs of individualistic pioneers', interpreted and applied by the international organisation named *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (CIAM), or International Congresses of Modern Architecture. While this ideology made sweeping claims about its universal applicability, it always combined these with an open embrace of national and local variety in place-specific interpretations. Having clarified the essence of the Modern Movement, the argument of the book is that the high-rise blocks were actually not so much the product of ideology but rather a pragmatic response to the rapid influx of workers.

This book also argues that modernist mass housing, far from being the monochrome desert of uniformity that usually features in the current historiography, was a global landscape of riotously colourful variety and complexity, responding to the diversity of state power and the permutations of modernist architecture. The author's goal is to provide the first ever global overview of what was built in this movement, and why. This amounts to an historical narrative of epic proportions, a dramatic story involving highly professionalised and political actors. Mass housing, with its cheap materials and prefab elements, was supposed to be a great equaliser – not only between classes within a society but between societies. But, as Glendinning shows, perhaps it ended up reflecting differences between how effective and wealthy the various regimes were. For instance, in Italy, post-Second World War mass social housing planning, design and implementation were centralised but they generated an explosion of design innovation and microregional diversity.[12] In Canada, programmes for high modernist blocks with only indirect state involvement resulted in dwellings that were mainly privately built but massively supported by state tax subsidy and planning regulation. This is true, for instance, in the case of the apartment-tower construction in Greater Toronto.[13] Conversely, the Bantu locations of apartheid South Africa exemplified *dirigiste* state modernity in their organisation and political base, but followed an architecturally pre-modernist garden-city pattern of small individual houses.[14] It is in this framework that the reader can surely appreciate the value of the book, whose emphasis is on the vast local diversity of mass housing. This volume therefore provides a global overview prospectus of the potential for further in-depth research on a transnational basis.

The author shows the relevance of the transnational approach for the following reason. Although the nation-state was undoubtedly the most prominent organisational element for the global story of mass housing, the consequent tendency to confine historical accounts to individual nation-states has led to strong biases and imbalances in comparative interpretation. The chance for transnational dialogue among historians of mass housing is scarcely stimulated by often widely divergent national preoccupations. The book advocates for a transnational approach to help overcome the typical frame of social-housing advocacy, especially in Western countries, in terms of universal rights and ideals, such as 'the welfare state', 'solving the housing problem', and so on.[15] Glendinning demonstrates that the real driving forces of mass-housing construction have often been locally-specific political processes and emergency pressures such as the need to rebuild after the destruction caused by the Second World War and the unceasing waves of rural-to-urban migration in Southern Europe countries.[16] Despite the global reach of mass housing, explicitly international organisations and discourses were generally far less influential than national or local structures, and their role was in many places largely confined to hortatory initiatives such as the system-building promotion craze of the 1960s in Western Europe.[17]

The third book concentrates on Eastern Europe, in particular East Germany, on the eve of the 1989 Peaceful Revolution. This book is precisely focused on a single case study, which is how Leipzig was remade during the Cold War, especially in its closing years. The author, Andrew Demshuk, analyses how civic life functioned in Leipzig, the second-largest city in East Germany, during an era marked by urban decay. By the 1980s, Leipzig was one of the most decrepit cities in Europe, its old town having disintegrated after decades of neglect and demolitions. Such a situation was well documented by the 1989 videos '*Ist Leipzig noch zu retten*?'[18] (Can Leipzig still be saved?) and '*Wie ist Leipzig noch zu retten?* (How can Leipzig be saved?).[19] The book is particularly valuable in terms of showing just how effectively a single case study can advance the historiography of the city during the Cold War. Demshuk uses Leipzig as a case by which to sketch out a multilayered schematic of how East German planning was a composite of interlocking decisions at – and negotiations between – the central, district, municipal and private levels.

The book pays attention to the pervasive local initiatives called 'urban ingenuity' that were launched during the late years of the GDR, usually in response to the inaction of national political elites and the disillusion of the wider public. By using this term, the author points to, on the one hand, the intentions of a new generation of political and planning elites who spent considerable creative energy trying to combat urban blight and build a humane city. On the other hand, urban ingenuity highlights how disaffected local homeowners, preservationists and young people sought to satisfy their needs and interests within the bounds of late communism. The author stresses that urban historians have traditionally explained 1989 as a result of popular anger at economic and housing shortages, environmental catastrophe, Ministry for State Security abuses, political corruption and travel restrictions, relegating the deeply intertwined factor of urban decay to a supporting role.[20] Although housing shortages are one facet of urban decay, it is the general sense that underinvestment and ugliness play a bigger role in undermining a regime than these studies usually recognise. This lacuna is striking given the longstanding credo in both Western and Eastern blocs that the urban environment helps to mould the outlook of a population.

The exploration of these acts of urban ingenuity amid catastrophic urban decay informs the reader about the creative activism of local communist officials who, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, built a palatial bowling alley (the *Bowlingtreff*) without Berlin's knowledge or approval. This element explains the title of the book *Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany*. The *Bowlingtreff* was not merely an urban entertainment centre but a revolution in those days. The palatial bowling alley emboldened Leipzigers to think they could achieve things when they acted together and it thus politicised them in new ways. The reconstruction of this episode helps the writer to show how the public sphere functioned in Leipzig before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Along with urban ingenuity, the author anchors its discourse also on the concept of 'urban dystopia'.[21] Demshuk defines it as a conjunction of factors that made a city appear unlivable to both residents and a new generation of architects. The analysis is compelling because it interrelates urban decay, urban ingenuity and urban dystopia, so it deserves to be extended to other European Eastern city-making processes. This is why the book may be the first step towards a new global history of the Eastern countries during the Cold War.

The fourth book changes scale and location and deals with a more specific theme of twentieth-century urban history of Europe, i.e. non-European architecture during the Cold War in Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria), Baghdad (Iraq), Abu Dhabi (the United Arab Emirates) and Kuwait City (Kuwait) that was inspired by models from Eastern Europe. The author, Łukasz Stanek, draws the reader's attention to two essential issues. The first is the fact that the Cold War brought about new geographies of collaboration that remarkably impacted a myriad of locations. The second peculiarity is that the engagement of Eastern European architects, planners and construction companies by non-European states has been reported predominantly within Western historiographies.[22] This blind spot, in turn, has reinforced a reductive conceptual framework by means of which architecture and urban development in the Global South have been studied.[23] Łukasz Stanek shows that the urban history of twentieth-century West African and Middle Eastern cities cannot be understood without accounting for the exchanges between Eastern Europe and socialist countries elsewhere.

The overall merit of this work is to provide a broad survey of architectural mobilities between these regions, including the flows of blueprints and master plans of cities. Architecture and urban planning as disciplines are not the only focus of Stanek, who goes deeper into construction materials and machinery, design details and images, norms and regulations, teaching curricula and research methodology, and intellectual and manual labour. The challenge of this book is to deconstruct the dominant conceptual model, which reduces urbanisation processes in the Global South to being path-dependences of the colonial encounter with Western Europe and the results of the globalisation of capitalism. The author demonstrates how urbanisation in the Global South was also shaped by the collaboration of local professionals and institutions with those from socialist countries.

The countries under analysis show another particularity: they have never been Soviet satellites or Marxist–Leninist regimes. The elites of these countries also cultivated several regional and global alliances with Western countries. These nations were therefore sites of competition and sometimes collaboration between professionals across and within geopolitical boundaries. The author studied the cities of Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City because he believes these cities offer privileged vantage points for a study of the bifurcations of networks of architecture and construction expertise during the Cold War. These bifurcations also opened up between the socialist countries themselves: Eastern European countries did not present themselves as an homogeneous Soviet bloc. Instead, both capitalist and communist countries were marked by their distinct political ambitions and constraints, economic interests, technological profiles, industrial capacities, and architectural and urban planning traditions.

In highlighting these bifurcations, the book contributes to a more heterogeneous and antagonistic historiography of global urbanisation and its architecture. The recalibrated perspectives adopted by this book challenge capitalist triumphalism that reduces the history of global architecture during the Cold War to a story of Westernisation or Americanisation. Rather, the

view from the Global South allows readers to see that architecture and urban planning were co-produced by Eastern Europeans, West Africans and Middle Easterners as part of a broader set of complex and uneven negotiations between parties with different and evolving geopolitical ambitions, state-building aims, economic motivation and cultural agendas. What was distinctive about Eastern European approaches was that Communist values led to distinctive urbanisation processes and to a different vision of housing and urbanity.[24]

Despite making such claims, the writer did not go into detail in remarking upon the differences between Communist- and Western-oriented urbanisation and this aspect may be the next step to take for the historiography of Cold War. Stanek's research primarily shows that Soviet-oriented architecture and planning were deployed in socialist modernisation programmes that often resulted in the construction of almost identical blocks and very homogeneous urban landscapes. This was the case in Accra, where architecture and the construction-materials industry were reorganised with the aim of becoming integrated into a centrally planned apparatus that was put in charge of state-led industrialisation, collectivisation of agriculture and an egalitarian welfare provision. The writer also shows that Communist-fostered planning had different outcomes in terms of urbanisation, depending on location. In some cases, it created favourable conditions for accelerated development (such as in the area around the National Theatre in Lagos) but, in other instances, it contributed to slowdowns and obstacles to rapid urbanisation (such as in the case of the International Trade Fair in Accra, where the nationalisation policies led to still unresolved conflicts around land ownership).

To conclude, these four books give readers the opportunity not only to better understand the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European city but also to deepen the relationship between the different regions of Europe, especially during the Cold War. These volumes surely increase awareness of how the circulation of ideas and models of public action impacted on concrete spaces and places. They also introduce a couple of interesting sub-themes, which could pave the way for further research in the field of transnational urban history.

The first is the question of whether there is a distinctively 'European' urban history, as Wakeman has suggested. This claim is not supported by any comparisons with other parts of the world, but an example of such a comparison recently emerged in the specialist session 'Towards **[Q4]** a Transnational Urban History of Japan and Europe: Modernity and Governance' of the international conference EAUH2022.[25] This approach can be extended to other non-Western countries and thus produce new knowledge in the field of study.

The second, related, question is the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world, which comes through more clearly with the Glendinning and Stanek books. From Glendinning's descriptions, the reader may get the impression that the 'Modern Movement' emerged from Europe but that its ideas spread globally, which is similar to the sense we get from Stanek's work, which details how European ideas and practices were applied abroad. The discussion of both books suggests the existence of important tensions and nuances in this story, but is the idea of diffusion from Europe to the rest of the world also something that we should seek, or the authors seek to challenge? Do these global flows and networks also mean that European cities were being shaped by extra-European forces?

The third sub-theme arises from the reading of Demshuk and Stanek books. Works such as Demshuk's book advance our still only partial understanding of socialist urban planning in Eastern Europe and are therefore required reading before we turn towards how that same model was exported abroad. Reading these two books together might also allow us to understand just how much local conditions compromised or reconfigured even the most apparently top-down and universalistic models of urban development. For instance, were some of the problems caused by the application of Eastern European model in places like Accra comparable or related to the issues faced in Leipzig?

The changes that occurred in the modern era have shaped the development of Europe and its influence abroad, especially in the Global South, and these books are able to explain these changes. These books put Europe at the centre of attention but minimise the Western Eurocentric focus of urban history. The texts highlight the influential role of all European regions in societal changes across the globe as well as offering new vantage-points from which to view economic and political shifts across the decades. Together, these four studies are surely embedded in the approaches tied to global urban history for two reasons. First, they encourage the analysis of European cities as creations and creators of large-scale or global historical phenomena and, second, they remind the readership that Europe is a changing continent and still needs more analysis, mostly from a transnational perspective, to be fully understood. As **[Q5]** stated by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, Europe is the result of the historical and mental unit that brought about modernity, for all its best and worst features.[26] The old histories of European modernity need updating, and focusing on the Cold War is one particularly useful way of doing this. The Cold War vision of Western and Eastern blocs should be artifacts that have definitely crumbled along with the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, the 2022 invasion of Russia in Ukraine scrambles once more the familiar chronologies we have assembled and may bring about the kind of radical geopolitical change that prompts us to again rewrite European

urban history.

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Footnotes

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