

The 1910 Royal Institute of British Architects' Conference: a focus for international town planning?

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ABSTRACT: The 1910 International Town Planning Conference is rightly seen as a major moment in the development of modern urban design. It drew together more than 1,000 architects and planners from across the world. At first sight, the conference consequently appears to provide further evidence for the importance of transnational town planning networks in this period. This article, by contrast, highlights the domestic agendas which underwrote the event. It shows that the conference was considerably less successful and less international than has previously been argued. It thus stresses the limitations of the town planning movement: underscoring the continued importance of national differences and national debates.

The English architect Edwin Lutyens has been described as many things. For some, he is a genius; for others, he is a phenomenon; for still others, he is 'a magician, a spell-binder'.¹ His English country houses, his imperial architecture at New Delhi, his war memorials in Belgium and in France: in all these places and in all these different ways, he exhibited a quite remarkable grasp of space and form.² Despite his significance as an architect, however, no one has ever described Lutyens as a great husband or father. His was a loveless marriage and an unhappy home. His wife, Lady Emily, found life with Lutyens so appalling that, seeking escape, she plunged herself into Theosophy and threw herself at the apprentice Messiah Krishnamurti. Lutyens was equally unfulfilled, and sought in his architecture to express the feelings that he never seems to have been able

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¹ C. Hussey, *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens* (London, 1950); H.S. Goodhart-Rendel, 'Sir Edwin Lutyens, OM, PRA', *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 51 (1943–4), 51–2.

² A.S.G. Butler, *The Domestic Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens* (London, 1950); R.G. Irving, *Indian Summer: Lutyens, Baker and Imperial Delhi* (London, 1981); G. Stamp, *The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme* (London, 2006).

to share with his wife.³ It is, then, a measure of just how important the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Conference of 1910 was that he not only wrote to his wife about it, but also regretted her absence from it. 'I fear', he wrote, 'that the children are a bit too much for you and then that terrible Town-Planning Conference] is too dreadful depressing for you.'⁴ Nonetheless, he went on, all the other major architects' wives were present. However depressing Lady Emily found it, the conference was undeniably a big event for Lutyens.

Now Lutyens, who was on the organizing committee of the conference, had a particular reason for attending – and for stressing the importance of the occasion.⁵ But he did not exaggerate its popularity. The 1910 Town Planning Conference was one of the great events of the year. More than 1,400 architects and planners attended; more than 120 people gave papers or posed questions. Such was the interest that most sessions had to be run twice over.⁶ This was also more than just a conference. The whole event was accompanied by a mammoth exhibition in the Royal Academy – the first time, indeed, that Burlington House had been lent out to another organization for such a purpose.⁷ Between 10 and 15 October, town planning and town planners seemed to be everywhere: in the pages of newspapers, in the brand new buildings of the Royal Institute of British Architects, in the London Guildhall and the Hotel Cecil and on organized field trips to Letchworth and Hampstead, Bournville and Bath, Oxford and Cambridge, Port Sunlight and Regent's Park. It was, declared John Burns, the cabinet minister with responsibility for town planning, 'one of the most brilliant public functions he [had] witnessed in thirty years of public life'.⁸ Still more strikingly, when the American architect Daniel Burnham spoke at the conference dinner, he announced 'that when we come to leave our work to our surrogate, or speak to our sons perhaps for the last time, many will say, "The proudest moment of my life was in London at the Town Planning Conference of the Royal Institute of British Architects."⁹ Perhaps he was actually drunk; perhaps merely drunk on his own rhetoric. Given his famous fondness for alcohol and his notorious pomposity, both may be true.¹⁰ In any event, his words capture the sense

³ J. Ridley, *The Architect and His Wife: A Life of Edwin Lutyens* (London, 2002).

⁴ Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Archives, Lutyens papers, LuE/11/6/16, Lutyens to Lady Emily (7 Oct. 1910).

⁵ The list of committee members is given in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference: Members' Handbook* (London, 1910), 3. It eventually comprised Aston Webb (president of the RIBA), S.D. Adshead, Reginald Blomfield, W.D. Caroë, E. Guy Dawber, Edwin T. Hall, H.V. Lanchester, E.L. Lutyens, Ian MacAlister, Sydney Perks, Beresford Pite, W. H. Seth Smith, Leonard Stokes, Sir A. Brumwell Thomas, Raymond Unwin and Paul Waterhouse.

⁶ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference, London 10th to 15th October 1910: Transactions* (1910; London, 2011), 30–57.

⁷ *Building News*, 99 (1910), 527.

⁸ *Times*, 15 Oct. 1910, 11. See also R. Lawrence, 'Modern ideology and the creation of ancient town planning', *European Review of History*, 1 (1994), 11.

⁹ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 107.

¹⁰ T.S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner* (New York, 1974), 234, 236, 352.

of excitement that was shared by his international audience during those five days in October 1910.

The extent to which we should accept the conference and exhibition on their own terms remains debatable nonetheless. For most writers – and many participants – this was a truly cosmopolitan occasion: an event, in Helen Meller's words, which represented a 'bid for putting British ideas to the forefront of the international town-planning movement'; one which was imbued with 'the aura of international citizenship'.¹¹ Given the current emphasis on transnational and – especially – transatlantic approaches to the history of town planning, it is tempting to go further: to see the RIBA Conference as just one more site for an international movement; as yet another piece of evidence for the 'Urban Internationale' that Pierre-Yves Saunier has shown establishing itself from 1910 onwards.¹² And this is undeniably a part of the story. In many other respects, however, the whole business was underwritten by assumptions that were highly specific to Britain.¹³ Indeed, this article will argue that it was this national context – and the problems faced by British architects in particular – that is the most noteworthy element of the RIBA Conference. Ostensibly an international focus for an international town planning movement, it turns out that the event tells us more about national differences and national agendas than it does about an overarching transnational movement. For not only did the conference originate in the very specific circumstances of the British architectural profession, it also reveals the ways in which that context was different from the one shared by foreign architects and the fact that the insular architectural world was itself critically divided about town planning.¹⁴

Of course, it goes without saying that this great gathering of architects, planners and other interested parties was a self-consciously international one. It was preceded by advertisements in major journals across the globe. The Danish, the French, the Americans: all were invited to attend the

¹¹ H. Meller, *Patrick Geddes: Social Evolutionist and City Planner* (London and New York, 1990), 175. See also H. Meller, 'Philanthropy and public enterprise: international exhibitions and the modern town-planning movement, 1889–1913', *Planning Perspectives*, 10 (1995), 295–310, and M.G. Day, 'The contribution of Sir Raymond Unwin and R. Barry Parker', in A. Sutcliffe (ed.), *British Town Planning: The Formative Years* (Leicester, 1981), 185–6.

¹² P.-Y. Saunier, 'Sketches from the urban Internationale 1910–50: voluntary associations, international institutions, and US philanthropic foundations', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25 (2001), 380–403. See also D. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), ch. 5, and D.W. Gutzke (ed.), *Britain and Transnational Progressivism* (New York, 2008), 35–8.

¹³ A tension captured in A. Sutcliffe, 'The debate on nineteenth-century planning', in A. Sutcliffe (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Urban Planning* (London, 1980), 7.

¹⁴ For an analogous example, which stresses national rather than international perspectives, see J.A. Peterson, 'The birth of organized city planning in the United States, 1909–1910', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 75 (2009), 123–33. See also P. Chabard, 'Competing scales in transnational networks: the impossible travel of Patrick Geddes' Cities Exhibition to America, 1911–1913', *Urban History*, 36 (2009), 202–22.

party.¹⁵ Papers, it was agreed, could be given in any one of four languages, English, French, German or Italian.¹⁶ Interpreters were recruited to provide translation in French, Dutch, German, Italian, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish.¹⁷ What's more, the invitations worked. As the *New York Architectural Record* put it, visitors came from throughout the world, 'representing nearly all the countries of Europe and Australia, Canada and the United States'.¹⁸ Figures from the Melbourne-based Royal Victorian Institute of Architects rubbed shoulders with colleagues from the Bavarian State Association for the Furtherance of Dwelling Houses. Representatives of La Ligue des Espaces Libres of Paris sat down with others from the Maatschappij tot Bevordering Bouwkunst of Amsterdam. Delegates from the Manitoba Association of Architects joined members of the Chambre Syndicale des Architectes de Belgique.¹⁹ It was claimed that 'a single architectural society in North Italy ... [had] applied for 300 tickets'.²⁰ And when the American ambassador hosted a reception for those of his countrymen who had attended, between 200 and 300 people turned up.²¹ In the words of the *South Wales Daily News*, here was 'A great conference of an international character.'²²

The exhibition was also international in its origins and its themes.²³ Indeed, as one journalist observed, 'quite four-fifths of the exhibits are foreign'.²⁴ Seeking material to display, the organizers wrote to more than three dozen cities, asking for assistance from Chicago, Sydney, Pretoria, Cairo, Ottawa and elsewhere.²⁵ Raymond Unwin was also sent to Berlin and Düsseldorf in search of more stuff.²⁶ He was able to pick up a huge amount from the Berlin Town Planning Exhibition, which had been held in May and June 1910, with the result that the London show was dominated by German examples. The support of the American government ensured that the United States was also well represented.²⁷ Visitors to the Royal Academy were thus confronted by a remarkably rich – and strikingly varied – collection of models, maps and drawings. Although the *Architect*

¹⁵ *Architekten*, 12 (1909–10), 304–5; *L'Architecture* (1910), 100; *Architectural Record*, 28 (1910), 455–8.

¹⁶ *Architect and Contract Reporter*, 5 Aug. 1910.

¹⁷ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 14–15.

¹⁸ *Architectural Record*, 28 (1910), 455–8.

¹⁹ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 17–24.

²⁰ *Architects' and Builders' Journal*, 32 (1910), 161.

²¹ *Times*, 14 Oct. 1910, 4.

²² *South Wales Daily News*, 20 Aug. 1910.

²³ See also W. Whyte, "'Exceedingly difficult to follow": the Greater Berlin competition at the RIBA Town Planning Conference of 1910', *Informationen zur modernen Stadtgeschichte* (2010), 29–41.

²⁴ *Sheffield Daily News*, 4 Oct. 1910. The logistical problems of this are mentioned in P. Cart de Lafontaine, 'Sir John William Simpson', *Journal of the RIBA*, 40 (1933), 514.

²⁵ RIBA Archive, RIBA Special Committee Minutes 5 (1908–11), Conference Committee, 190 (12 Jan. 1920).

²⁶ *Architects' and Builders' Journal*, 32 (1910), 322.

²⁷ *Town Planning Review*, 1 (1910–11), 180–2.

exaggerated in proclaiming this 'an exhibition which represents the best work all over the world', it was true that nothing quite like it had ever been seen before.²⁸ Here the curious could see the re-planning of Turin and suggestions for improvements to the Strand and Piccadilly. British colonial towns and English garden cities provided the preamble to Patrick Geddes' important 'Civic Survey' of Edinburgh. After that came the American, the Dutch, the Belgian, the Scandinavian and the Austrian Galleries – and then room after room devoted to Germany.²⁹ Not everyone was impressed by everything: H.V. Lanchester and Raymond Unwin believed that 'France and Italy were disappointing as to modern work.'³⁰ But it was clear that this was a truly global event.

The speakers at the conference were similarly cosmopolitan. Each day brought a mix of the insular and the international. Section One – 'Cities of the past' – included A.E. Brinckmann of Aachen, with his paper, 'Entwicklung des Städtebau-Ideals seit der Renaissance'. Section Two – 'Cities of the present' – brought in Baldwin Brown of Rochester, New York, as well as Louis Bonnier, with his 'Notice sur les architectures obligatoires dans la ville de Paris.' Section Three – 'City development and extension' – gives perhaps the best indication of just how variegated the mix was. First came Raymond Unwin with a paper on development plans. Then came Augustin Rey, with a lecture on a similar theme – though written in French, and reaching rather different conclusions. After him came W.E. Riley with 'City development', H.J. Stübgen with his 'Neure Fortschritte im Deutschen Städtebau' and Rudolf Eberstadt with his account of the Greater Berlin competition. Later sessions took in the re-planning of Khartoum, and the setting out of Canberra, the preservation of rural Brussels and the effectiveness of Swedish planning laws.³¹ This was an undeniably wide-ranging affair, with a self-evidently broad-ranging set of speakers. As the *Manchester Guardian* put it before the event had even started, 'The International character of the conference is emphasized in the papers to be read.'³²

In many ways, then, it is entirely right to see the 1910 RIBA Conference as an international focus for town planning. It can even be argued that it functioned as a place of transnational exchange – a site or space in which a genuinely cosmopolitan community of experts shared ideas and created new international networks.³³ Here, it appears, is further evidence of the Atlantic economy of progressivism.³⁴ More specifically,

²⁸ *Architect*, 84 (1910), 239.

²⁹ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference London 10th to 15th October 1910: Exhibition of Drawings and Models at the Royal Academy* (London, 1910).

³⁰ RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 734.

³¹ A full transcript of each can be found in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*.

³² *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Aug. 1910.

³³ See, for example, P. Uyttenhove, 'The garden city education of Belgian planners around the First World War', *Planning Perspectives*, 5 (1990), 273.

³⁴ Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, ch. 5.

here is evidence of the 'international movement' of town planners first described by Anthony Sutcliffe.³⁵ And, indeed, there was much at the conference to sustain such an analysis – not least the self-congratulation of those who took part. As the British town planner Stanley Adshead put it in his own talk, this was the embodiment of 'an age of constant international communication . . . a time when England and Germany are exchanging ideas by the frequent visits of their societies and deputations, by international congresses and exhibitions – when cities like New York are built up in a decade entirely from *motifs* borrowed from European models of the past'.³⁶ Nor was Adshead alone. The majority of those behind the event were part of a self-consciously transnational architectural world, committed to cosmopolitanism in design. John Simpson, secretary to the conference, and the man who – above all – ensured that the whole thing happened, was a member of the Permanent International Committee of Architects, and became not only a founder member of the Franco-British Union of Architects, but also a *Membre Correspondant de l'Institut de France* and a *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur*.³⁷ Patrick Geddes, the man whose survey of Edinburgh formed the heart of the British section of the exhibition, was a similarly global figure. His display in the Royal Academy was the culmination of work first begun at the Paris Exhibition of 1900, and would form the core of contributions to other conferences across the globe.³⁸ There is something irresistibly international about the fact that the *American Architect* employed an English architect to report on what a French architect believed would be the future of town planning across the 'temperate' world.³⁹ The hundreds of delegates, the dozens of different countries, the translators and the transatlantic ethos do all speak of what Charles Mulford Robinson called an 'international town planning movement' just six years later in 1916.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, this international perspective is not the only – or even, on its own, the most useful – way to interpret the conference. Whilst some aspects of the event sustain the sense that this was primarily a transnational forum, and support the idea of a network of town planners exchanging ideas across borders, other evidence suggests somewhat different perspectives. For the small band of town planners who routinely attended these sorts of events – who had, like Raymond Unwin, been at the Berlin and Düsseldorf conferences earlier that year, and who would go on to the Philadelphia conference of 1911 – this was undoubtedly yet another opportunity to

³⁵ A. Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, the United States and France, 1780–1914* (New York, 1981), ch. 6.

³⁶ S.D. Adshead, 'City improvement', in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 499.

³⁷ *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 40 (1933), 514.

³⁸ Meller, *Patrick Geddes*, 175–8. Due to ill health, Geddes himself was unable to attend the conference.

³⁹ G.A.T. Middleton, 'The International Town Planning Conference', *American Architect*, 98 (1910), 165.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 173.

discuss familiar themes and meet familiar people.⁴¹ But for the wider world of architects and engineers, this was a less significant (and significantly less international) event. Reviewing the coverage of the conference, what is more striking than the transnational attendance is the international indifference shown. With the exception of the *American Architect* and the New York *Architectural Record*, almost no other non-British architectural journal devoted anything more than a few lines to the event. In fact, it was ignored entirely by publications like *La Construction Moderne* and *Moderne Bauforme*, both of which chose to devote their attention to the Exposition Universelle at Brussels,⁴² and only fleetingly mentioned by the *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, which was more interested in the Berlin town planning exhibition than anything happening in London.⁴³

As this implies, significant national differences drove attitudes towards town planning – and to the conference itself. It is surely telling that the Americans covered the conference whilst the Germans and French ignored it. This American enthusiasm seems to sustain David Gutze's vision of a shared Anglo-American progressivism which particularly found its expression in town planning.⁴⁴ That German architects were unimpressed, however, suggests that this conference was not quite the international focus it at first sight appears to be. It also implies that, in this case at least, Sutcliffe was too sanguine in his assumption that 'rather than being in Germany's debt, Britain was taking part in a fairly equal exchange of ideas'.⁴⁵ The apparent French disregard for the conference is even more interesting. On the one hand, it seems to have grown out of a specifically Gallic ignorance of modern urban design more generally – hence the fact that the brief notice in *L'Architecture* announcing that the RIBA would hold a meeting 'au sujet des plan des villes' was followed with the explanation that this meant 'town planning'.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the fact that even this explanation was not followed up by any sort of report on the conference itself surely betokens a genuine lack of interest in the subject. Indeed, whilst one or two French commentators did urge their fellow countrymen to pay attention to the RIBA conference, it made no impact on France whatsoever.⁴⁷ Likewise, despite the presence of 11 German interpreters and the fabled 300 Italian architects attending, neither the Austrian *Allgemeine Bauzeitung*, the *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, nor *L'Architettura Italiana* bothered to note

⁴¹ M. Miller, *Raymond Unwin: Garden Cities and Town Planning* (Leicester, London and New York, 1982).

⁴² *La Construction Moderne*, 26 (1910–11), 5–9, 65; *Moderne Bauforme*, 9 (1910), 301–66, 367–414.

⁴³ *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 44 (1910), 757.

⁴⁴ D.W. Gutze, 'Progressivism in Britain and abroad', in *idem* (ed.), *Britain and Transnational Progressivism* (New York, 2008), 35–8.

⁴⁵ Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 194.

⁴⁶ *L'Architecture* (1910), 100. See also P.-Y. Saunier, 'Changing the city: urban international information and the Lyons municipality 1900–1940', *Planning Perspectives*, 14 (1999), 31.

⁴⁷ Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 159.

that the event was happening.⁴⁸ Despite the Swedish translator, a similar lack of interest was evinced by the Stockholm *Architektur*.⁴⁹

The reality was that this indifference not only exposed the relative importance of town planning to different national groups of architects: some of whom (like the Americans) were already heavily involved in such practices; others of whom (like the French) were still yet to take a serious interest. It also grew out of the remarkable resilience of distinctions between these different national traditions and differing groups of national architects. In part, this was simply the product of linguistic problems: barriers to comprehension that were encountered during the conference itself.⁵⁰ In part, it reflected the widely held belief that each nation naturally and inevitably produced its own national architecture.⁵¹ After all, even one of the conference's organizers, H.V. Lanchester, was quick to affirm that 'National character and national ideals are the paramount influences' on any town planning scheme.⁵² Most importantly, the striking strength of these national differences expressed some important structural factors: the different legal regimes, different professional environments and different systems of training and employment that existed in each nation.

The top architectural journals of each country reflected this. *Deutsche Bauzeitung* overwhelmingly focused on German building; *L'Architettura Italiana* scarcely ever got beyond Turin, let alone the Alps. There were exceptions, it is true. The *American Architect*, the *Architectural Record* and the British journals, the *Builder*, the *Architect*, and the *Architectural Review* were often more international in their scope. But they relied upon transatlantic, Anglophone connections and, in any event, tended to be just as parochial in the majority of their coverage as any of the continental publications. British ignorance about developments in German town planning was made evident in 1910 by the publication in the *RIBA Journal* of translated extracts from *Der Städtebau*. They were already six years out of date.⁵³ Thus even when the international architectural press did note events in London, it tended to be highly particular – even idiosyncratic – in its focus. Dutch architects who only read *Bouwkunst Tweemaandelijksch Tijdschrift*, for example, would not have known that the conference was

⁴⁸ *Allgemeine Bauzeitung* (1910); *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, 55 (1910); *L'Architettura Italiana*, 6 (1910–11). See also *Berliner Architekturwelt*, 13 (1910).

⁴⁹ *Architektur* (1910).

⁵⁰ On the problems, see T.C. Horsfall in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 712. An example of the difficulties caused can be found in the comments of P. MacNaughton, in *ibid.*, 284.

⁵¹ See, for example, B. Fletcher, *The History of Architecture* (London, 1896); A. Choisy, *Histoire de l'Architecture*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1899). More generally, see D. Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History* (London, 1980).

⁵² H.V. Lanchester, 'Cause and effect in the modern city', in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 235.

⁵³ *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 17 (1910), 410–17. See also RIBA Archive, RIBA Special Committee Minutes 5 (1908–11), Town Planning Committee, 129 (25 Jun. 1909).

happening.⁵⁴ Those who also took *Architectura* would have learnt about events in London. But in this journal, the conference was almost wholly ignored in favour of a familiar tour of English garden cities – with articles describing visits to Letchworth, Bournville and Hampstead.⁵⁵ Remarkably, this was also the case for town planning journals. *Der Städtebau* was a strikingly cosmopolitan outfit: covering urban design across the globe, and expecting its readers to be fluent in French as well as in German. Yet it devoted no more than a couple of hundred words to the RIBA Conference, and simply listed the titles of the talks given there.⁵⁶ This all reflected the continuing salience of national – rather than international – groups of architects; people who were focused on the events and buildings in national or regional capitals more than on the transnational world of architecture. More particularly, it meant that the 1910 Conference was big news – and of immediate importance – almost nowhere outside Britain.

Still more importantly, this lack of interest by European writers was echoed by a total absence of concern expressed by the British in what cross-channel commentators had to say about the event. The moment that the RIBA determined to hold the conference, it employed a cuttings agency to collect press clippings relating to it. They did a remarkably good job: acquiring articles from all the major newspapers (both local and national), from the architectural press, and from such esoteric outfits as the *Furniture Record* and *Gas World*. Significantly, however, the RIBA does not appear to have considered it necessary, or desirable, to look beyond Britain. There is no record here of continental or even transatlantic periodicals: the focus is purely parochial, entirely insular.⁵⁷ The records of the committee which organized the conference show a similar lack of concern over what non-national writers made of the event. They invited foreign architects to come, and listed their attendance in the programme, but there is no evidence that they entered into sustained correspondence with them, nor asked them to report on how the conference had gone down at home. Nor did the British architectural press show any interest in how any of this was undersoond abroad. All this suggests that, at least in the minds of the organizers, the real audience for the conference was national, not transnational; that the real goal of the event was domestic rather than foreign.

The truth is that the conference was both an international focus for town planning and an international pretext for domestic political lobbying.⁵⁸ The Royal Institute of British Architects was profoundly concerned that 1909 Housing and Town Planning Act had not taken proper account of the role of the architect in urban design. Even as the bill was being drafted, the

⁵⁴ *Bouwkunst Tweemaandelijksch Tijdschrift*, 2 (1910).

⁵⁵ *Architectura*, 18 (1910), 346–9, 355–9, 373–6.

⁵⁶ *Städtebau*, 7 (1910), 120.

⁵⁷ RIBA Library, RIBA/ENV, Town Planning Conference: Press Clippings File.

⁵⁸ M. Hawtree, 'The emergence of the town planning profession', in Sutcliffe (ed.), *British Town Planning*, 72–5.

RIBA sought to emphasize the magnitude of this issue. It wrote to John Burns in October 1908, urging 'the importance of provision being made for the *artistic* aspect of Town Planning'. It expressed the desire that the RIBA should be included as a statutory body to be consulted on all town planning decisions. It did so again and again.⁵⁹ And it was just as it became clear that all this effort was to no avail that the RIBA's Town Planning Committee hit upon another means of emphasizing the centrality of the architect to the creation of modern towns and cities. The anticipated arrival of 200 members of the German Garden City Association in July 1909 prompted the ambition of holding an exhibition on British town planning.⁶⁰ The idea was a strikingly smart one. It was a way of drawing attention to a group of foreign visitors, united by their admiration for British architecture – and, by extension, a way of publicizing the importance of British architects in shaping modern town planning. Within days, the idea grew, and by the end of June 1910, the RIBA was proposing a still more ambitious event: an international conference as well as an exhibition.⁶¹ But the desire to make this a demonstration of the architect's significance to town planning never went away. Indeed, early suggestions that it should include sociologists, engineers and other experts were soon dismissed and the chairmen of the various conference sessions were instructed to avoid the discussion of 'questions of hygiene, housing of the poor, administration, traffic, ground values and the likes'.⁶² This was about emphasizing the centrality of British architects – and about influencing the British government. It was less an international than a home game.

The conference, then, was the product of a specifically British set of concerns. From the moment it opened, they were reiterated again and again. Thus, at the Inaugural Meeting in the Guildhall, held to mark the start of the event, the president of the RIBA, Leonard Stokes, thanked the cabinet minister John Burns for lending his support to the conference and for attending it. He also acknowledged that 'It is Mr Burns and his Town Planning Act that have made this meeting possible.' He went on, however, to criticize the legislation, arguing that 'we architects think that his Bill did not go far enough, and we should like to have seen some more precautions taken to ensure effective planning from an architectural standpoint'.⁶³ The end of the event was similarly marked by the decision of the RIBA to make Burns an honorary member.⁶⁴ He was then cajoled into providing a preface for the Institute's 1911 'Suggestions to promoters of town planning schemes': a document which magnanimously accepted that 'The preparation of all the data upon which the design must be based

⁵⁹ RIBA Archive, RIBA Special Committee Minutes 5 (1908–11), Town Planning Committee (28 Oct. 1908). See also 49–50, 99–100, 106.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Town Planning Committee (17 Jun. 1909), 109–10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Town Planning Committee (25 Jun. 1909), 128.

⁶² RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁴ *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 18 (1910–11), 25.

hardly falls within the province of the architect', but which went on to conclude that 'for the design of the town plan, the architecturally trained mind is as essential as for the design of a single building'.⁶⁵

This was plain enough, but, within the walls of the RIBA, the true purpose of the conference was made even plainer. At meetings of the Town Planning Committee before the event, Stanley Adshead had expressed his concern that municipal engineers – rather than architects – were taking the lead in town planning, and urged firm action.⁶⁶ At a celebration after the conference, John Simpson spelled the lesson out in words that left no doubt of his motivations:

He thought the Royal Institute was benefited by being brought so prominently into public notice. It had been given a place in the sun, and it was for the body of its members to keep it there. The Institute had done its duty to the profession by showing the public that the finest town planning was, and always had been, done by architects.⁶⁷

In other words: there was very specific reason for staging the conference. Not only did the RIBA wish to push the claims of architects to preside over town planning, to prove – as Simpson put it in another context – that 'Architecture . . . will tolerate no rivals'.⁶⁸ But, more precisely still, the RIBA wanted to press its own claim to be the sole voice articulating British architects' ambitions and ideals.

This attempt at 'cornering the practice of town planning in Britain' was controversial in two respects.⁶⁹ In the first place, the suggestion that town planning was the province of the architect rather than the surveyor or the engineer was understandably rejected by both surveyors and engineers. The relationship between the three professions was, at best, unclear. It was possible to practise as all three – as, indeed, some individuals did.⁷⁰ More specifically, the question of who was or was not an architect remained a moot point. After all, in the nineteenth century it was still possible for someone to describe themselves as both 'an architect and hairdresser'.⁷¹ This confusion bred contention – and the RIBA's attempt to assume the role of arbiter in town planning issues only made matters worse. At the conference, indeed, the architect Beresford Pite's confident declaration that problems of urban development were essentially architectural, and would soon be treated as such, was loudly rebutted by an engineer, who

⁶⁵ 'Suggestions to promoters of town planning schemes by the Town Planning Committee RIBA', *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 18 (1910–11), 668.

⁶⁶ RIBA Archive, RIBA Special Committee Minutes 5 (1908–11), Town Planning Committee, 131 (3 Nov. 1909).

⁶⁷ *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 18 (1910–11), 26.

⁶⁸ J.W. Simpson, *Essays and Memorials* (London, 1923), 172.

⁶⁹ Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 171.

⁷⁰ See A. Saint, *Architect and Engineer: A Study in Sibling Rivalry* (New Haven and London, 2008); E. Newton, 'Architects and surveyors', in N. Shaw and T.G. Jackson (eds.), *Architecture: A Profession or an Art* (London, 1892).

⁷¹ F. Jenkins, *Architect and Patron* (London, 1962), 50.

'exclaimed with evident opposition and deep resentment, "I'm sure they won't!"'⁷² Similar emotions influenced engineering periodicals, with the editor of *Gas World*, for one, greeting the conference with studied contempt. 'Architects', he wrote, 'cannot be trusted to see far beyond styles and mouldings, to make proper provision for the accessories of modern life.' Predictably enough, in this case the solution was gas – 'which is never welcome at the Royal Institute of British Architects'.⁷³ But although the complaint seems comically particular, it was in fact evidence of a more general problem – and one that was widely recognized enough to be echoed in *The Times*, which likewise complained that the conference lacked the essential involvement of the engineers.⁷⁴ They and the surveyors responded with their own conference in 1911.⁷⁵

The second claim – that the RIBA should speak for all architects – was, in its turn, just as hotly contested. The Royal Institute of British Architects had been founded in 1834. By 1900, however, only 10 per cent of British architects were members.⁷⁶ Ten years later, things were somewhat better – but it remained the case that three-quarters of the profession had little to do with the RIBA;⁷⁷ indeed, the role of the Institute remained highly controversial.⁷⁸ In the 1890s, it had been very publicly and very embarrassingly rejected by a large number of high-profile architects in what turned out to be a damaging battle over the question of the compulsory registration of architects. The RIBA was believed to be at the vanguard of this move – and so appalled were many of its members that they simply resigned. The division between those in favour of registration, and those – known as the Memorialists – who opposed it, haunted the profession for years.⁷⁹ On the one side were those who saw the Institute as a powerful force for good and registration as a way of uniting the architectural profession behind the RIBA. On the other were those, like the hot-headed and high-minded Reginald Blomfield, who believed that any attempt to create a professional body or to institutionalize practice served only to 'prostitute architecture'.⁸⁰ In the early years of the twentieth century, efforts were made to bridge the gap between those who saw the RIBA as the salvation and those who saw it as the perdition of the architectural profession, but although there had been some successes, the

⁷² T.H. Mawson, quoted in G.E. Cherry, *The Evolution of British Town Planning* (Heath and Reach, 1974), 46.

⁷³ *Gas World*, 27 Aug. 1910.

⁷⁴ *Times*, 24 Aug. 1910.

⁷⁵ Cherry, *Evolution of British Town Planning*, 45–8.

⁷⁶ J. Wilton-Ely, 'The rise of the professional architect in England', in S. Kostof (ed.), *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (1977; Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000), 202.

⁷⁷ A. Saint, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven and London, 1983), 66.

⁷⁸ M. Crinson and J. Lubbock, *Architecture: Art or Profession? Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education* (Manchester and New York, 1994), 38–85.

⁷⁹ W. Whyte, 'Memorialists (act. 1891–1903)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, Oxford University Press, Oct. 2008 (www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/96544, accessed 14 Feb 2009).

⁸⁰ Quoted in J. Summerson, *Architectural Association 1847–1947* (London, 1947), 32.

gap still remained. Indeed, it still split the RIBA down the middle. The conference can consequently be seen as analogous to the RIBA Board of Architectural Education, set up in 1904 as an attempt to reunite the profession.⁸¹

The whole event was thus perilously placed at the epicentre of British architecture: the focus for a number of different – and distinctively British – debates. Moreover, buried deep beneath these discourses was a still more problematic issue for British architects, an almost tectonic division that ran through the architectural world, fracturing even the RIBA itself. For the battles about registration and the question of whether architects were artists, professionals or technical experts, somewhat like engineers, served as proxies for a much more profound disagreement: the struggle between the arts and crafts and beaux-arts traditions of architecture.⁸² The Memorialists reflected the former, with its emphasis on the humble, the informal and the picturesque.⁸³ Those who favoured registration and who wished to strengthen the role of the RIBA tended to prefer the beaux-arts, with its emphasis on the formal, the axial and the neo-classical.⁸⁴ Both groups of architects were present at the conference – indeed, in Edwin Lutyens, the move from arts and crafts to beaux-arts found its personification.⁸⁵

As a result, attendees could not help but be aware of the divisions within the profession. The impassioned advocacy of the beaux-arts enthusiasts, Charles Reilly, Stanley Adshead and Henry Lanchester – each of whom spoke up for uniformity, simplicity and 'great civic dignity' – only made matters worse, with Adshead and Reilly, in particular, turning on the arts-and-crafts-inspired garden city movement as impractical and lacking in both sense and style.⁸⁶ This fundamental difference in approach was noted at the time.⁸⁷ 'It is already evident', observed the *Architect* in its review of the conference, 'that there are two distinct schools of town planning – the school of the wide street, the stately vista, and the dignified frontage, on the one hand; and on the other the advocates of the narrow road with the distant frontages, the picturesque and piquant line, and the closed

⁸¹ See H.M. Fletcher, 'The RIBA and architectural education', in G.A. Gotch (ed.), *The Growth and Work of the RIBA, 1834–1934* (London, 1934), 90–3, and W. Whyte, *Oxford Jackson: Architecture, Education, Status, and Style, 1835–1924* (Oxford, 2006), 80–6.

⁸² Crinson and Lubbock, *Architecture*, 72.

⁸³ P. Davey, *Arts and Crafts Architecture* (London, 1995).

⁸⁴ J. Sharples, A. Powers and M. Shippobottom (eds.), *Charles Reilly and the Liverpool School of Architecture* (Liverpool, 1996). See also A. Drexler (ed.), *The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts* (London, 1975), and R.D. Middleton (ed.), *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture* (London, 1982).

⁸⁵ J.M. Crook, *The Dilemma of Style: Architectural Ideas from the Picturesque to the Post-Modern* (London, 1987), 220–4.

⁸⁶ C. Reilly, 'The immediate future in England', Adshead, 'City improvement', and Lanchester, 'Cause and effect in the modern city', all in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*. See especially 339–44 and 392.

⁸⁷ See also W.R. Davidge, 'The Town Planning Conference: a review', *RIBA Journal*, 3rd ser., 17 (1909–10), 776.

vista, the successful imitators of our garden cities and suburbs'.⁸⁸ Far from showing that the architects – rather than the surveyors or the engineers – had the answers to Britain's planning problems, the conference simply exposed the truth that they could not agree on a common solution.

The fact that the RIBA had co-opted an international constituency to make a point in a national debate made the situation more tense. Because the conference did not only reveal a divided profession, it also uncovered the weaknesses in Britain's town planning tradition more generally. Naturally, this was not the intention. The event had, after all, been conceived as an opportunity to emphasize the achievements of British architects. But as the event grew closer, the reality grew clearer. It revealed, as one journalist put it, 'how far the foreigner; particularly the German, [had] outstripped us'.⁸⁹ It showed, as another periodical put it, that 'Great Britain enters upon the subject fifty years too late, and with a deplorable record behind her'.⁹⁰ Reviewing the British contribution to the exhibition, the *Builder* concluded in similarly gloomy tones: 'We cannot', it wrote, 'find here anything resembling the thoroughness with which the leading Continental countries approach the question of civic design'.⁹¹ Predictably, there were those who took a cheerier line. The *Building News* believed that it had been an 'unqualified success': one that saved town planning from the risk of falling 'into the hands of mere functionaries and faddists, to the almost total exclusion of the architect'.⁹² However, even it concluded that the conference exposed an important fallacy. 'Somehow', it wrote, 'it has been generally thought that England has been taking the lead in this matter, though there have been vague ideas that Germany has been doing something. That they have been the leaders while we have been following far behind, is more nearly a true statement of the case'.⁹³ Others argued that even if British town planning was poor, 'the creation of houses that are homes is one of England's monopolies'.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, this did not help the RIBA. For the corollary of such an argument was that whilst architects could be trusted to design individual buildings, they should not be left solely responsible for larger-scale planning decisions.⁹⁵

Even the encouraging words of friendly foreigners were not wholly helpful. The Anglophile Rudolf Eberstadt, for example, warned the conference that the British should not adopt German methods and German ideas. 'As we in Berlin get a French play from Paris, or an English scarf from London, at the very moment when it is out of fashion', he declared; 'so the Englishman's admiration for our street-planning system came at the very

⁸⁸ *Architect*, 84 (1910), 274.

⁸⁹ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 4 Oct. 1910.

⁹⁰ 'B.K.', 'A retrospect of the Town Planning Conference', *Architectural Review*, 28 (1910), 310.

⁹¹ *Builder*, 99 (1910), 415.

⁹² *Building News*, 99 (1910), 599.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 532.

⁹⁴ *Sussex Daily News*, 4 Oct. 1910.

⁹⁵ *Western Daily Mercury and Sussex Daily News*, 27 Aug. 1910.

moment when we wish to do away with it.' Instead, he argued, something close to the garden city model – which had been 'created in England' – should become the basis for all future developments.⁹⁶ Encouraging though this was for some architects, his advice nonetheless served to emphasize the divisions within the British architectural profession. For the people he was criticizing – those who wished to adopt the axial, formal planning pioneered in the great German cities – were men like Adshead, Lanchester and Reilly; British architects who favoured the 'huge but simple lines' Eberstadt decried.⁹⁷

That these divisions and these arguments did not cause more problems for the RIBA can be explained by the fact that they were largely irrelevant to the one man whose opinion counted. John Burns – the man whom the Royal Institute sought to influence through its conference and exhibition – was, in many respects, an indifferent minister. It was widely believed that he had only been appointed because the fact that he dropped his aitches made him sound like the authentic voice of the working class. He almost certainly retained his place in the cabinet solely because of his total, unyielding personal loyalty to the prime minister.⁹⁸ But however ineffective he was, this did not dent his self-confidence, nor shift his firmly held opinions. Burns was, as Anthony Sutcliffe puts it, a 'xenophobe'.⁹⁹ Moreover, he needed to counteract the suspicions of his colleagues that his town planning act was essentially German in inspiration and effect.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, even before the conference began, he made his views entirely clear. At the opening of a garden suburb in Romford in the August of 1910, for example, he announced that the British 'had nothing to gain and all to lose, by imitating the example of Germany and America'. He went on to condemn the 'miserable croakers, living in a fog of pessimism quite foreign to us as a nation, who said that we ought to go abroad in order to see what to do'. And, in case anyone had missed the point of his message, he concluded by announcing that 'He would rather be found dead in England than alive anywhere else.'¹⁰¹

Given this background, it was entirely predictable that – for Burns, at any rate – the real point of the event was to expose alien architects to the superiority of British design. That was, indeed, precisely the gist of his own speech at the conference itself, where he stressed the need for each nation 'with its own character, individuality, climate, and physical structure' to 'go its own way and copy nobody'. 'In my judgment', he went on, 'in London there is too much Haussmanising going on already;

⁹⁶ R. Eberstadt, 'Town planning in Germany', in RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 314, 313.

⁹⁷ Adshead, 'City improvement', 502

⁹⁸ K.D. Brown, *John Burns* (London, 1977), ch. 7.

⁹⁹ Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 178.

¹⁰⁰ D. Hardy, "'More homes, better houses, prettier streets'", *Town and Country Planning*, 78 (2009), 25.

¹⁰¹ *Architects' and Builders' Journal*, 32 (1910), 110.

and if we are not careful we may get too much of a Sieges Allee type of civic embellishment.¹⁰² In a sense, this xenophobia was helpful. It meant that Burns was impervious to the divisions and disagreements that the conference revealed. It was also, however, highly problematic – because it meant that the assumptions which underlay the RIBA's work were flawed. He was not impressed by an international exhibition or a cosmopolitan conference. They did not prove to him either that Britain was failing to involve its architects in town planning enough, or that the RIBA should become the vehicle for revising town planning law. For Burns, the conference simply confirmed the validity of the status quo.

It is therefore scarcely surprising that the result of the Royal Institute's efforts was not quite the overwhelming success that both contemporaries and subsequent historians have tended to believe. True enough, the sheer scale of the occasion marked it out as a major achievement. It is true too, as Gordon Cherry puts it, that in Britain, at any event, 'The Conference focussed the attention of the whole profession.' But to argue that it 'represented a major triumph for the architectural view of planning' or that it 'proved an entire success in every way' seems somewhat exaggerated.¹⁰³ The conference, in fact, failed to influence the government and served to expose the fractured and fissiparous nature of the British architectural profession. The RIBA Town Planning Committee's subsequent acknowledgment that architects could not, on their own, be responsible for all aspect of urban design in that sense reflects failure – as did John Burns' preface to their report, which called on the engineers and surveyors to produce their own proposals.¹⁰⁴ The mixed achievements of 1910 were revealed nine years later in the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act, which did make provision for the RIBA to be consulted – but only in very specific circumstances. Far from assuming the statutory role that its backers had hoped for, much less ensuring that only registered architects could undertake town planning, the act simply ensured that 'when the character of a locality renders such a course expedient', the local authority should consult an architect selected from a panel drawn up by the RIBA.¹⁰⁵ This was victory of a sort – but a distinctly mutilated victory. In many cases, even this provision would be ignored.

This does not mean that the 1910 RIBA Town Planning Conference was a waste of time; nor that it should be seen as a complete failure. In fact, it was a major event for those who attended it – and those who ran it. For Lutyens – and for his wife – the sheer scale of the occasion made it 'terrible', 'dreadful' and 'depressing'. For the other people involved, it

¹⁰² RIBA, *Town Planning Conference Transactions*, 71.

¹⁰³ Cherry, *Evolution of British Town Planning*, 45; Middleton, 'International Town Planning Conference', 161.

¹⁰⁴ 'Suggestions to promoters of town planning schemes by the Town Planning Committee RIBA'.

¹⁰⁵ Housing and Town Planning &c Act 1919 (9&10 Geo 5 CH35), Part I.1(3).

was a tremendous success – even, for Daniel Burnham, apparently the ‘proudest moment of my life’. Without a doubt, this coming together of architects and town planners from across the globe represented a focus for the international town planning movement, a chance to air their ideas in front of unusually large and enthusiastic group of people. In that sense, it does reveal the transnational nature of discourses about town planning in this period. The conference also, however, exposes the limitations of the town planning movement itself. In the first place, it underscores the continued importance of national boundaries. Barriers – be they linguistic, legal, or simply professional – still stood between different national groups of architects. This was reflected in the disregard shown for the conference by the leading architectural journals outside Britain, and by the British lack of interest in how the event played out across the seas. It was also – more importantly – a narrowly national set of considerations that inspired the conference itself. For, above all, it needs to be recognized that the whole affair was intended to resolve the purely parochial problem of how to ensure that the voice of British architects – and, particularly, the voice of the Royal Institute of British Architects – was heard when matters of town planning were discussed.

The conference, then, highlights the disjunction between a transnational discourse and its national manifestations; between the idealistic world of international town planners and the realities of national difference that they confronted. It reveals a truly global movement that was challenged by the particularism and nationalism of those whom it sought to influence. In the final analysis, then, the RIBA Conference was less than an international focus – and much more.