
Citation:

Ewen, S (2015) Helen Meller (ed.), Ghent Planning Congress 1913. Premier Congrès International et Exposition Comparée des Villes. London: Routledge, 2014. xvii + 716pp. £95.00 hbk. Urban History, 42 (1). 173 - 175. ISSN 1469-8706 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926814000674>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/1802/>

Document Version:

Article (Updated Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Helen Meller (ed.), *Ghent Planning Congress 1913. Premier Congrès International et Exposition Comparée des Villes*. London: Routledge, 2014. xvii + 716pp. £95.00 hbk. doi:10.4324/9780203762394.

This remarkable book is a wonderful example of the flurry of cross-national knowledge circulations and information exchanges that occurred in the early twentieth century. Experts from local government, academia, architecture, planning, and engineering came together at a number of international congresses and exhibitions to share their ideas for building a safer and healthier society just as Europe slid inexorably towards war. There was a palpable air of excitement around such events, and this book, a product of this groundswell of action, captures this energy a century after its original publication.

The book is a facsimile copy of the original proceedings of the Premier Congrès International et Exposition Comparée des Villes, which took place in Ghent from 27 July-1 August, 1913. It was compiled by an organising committee of Belgian reformers, including the founder of the Union of Belgian Towns, Émile Vinck, and the peace campaigner, Paul Otlet. The Congress, which temporarily placed Belgium at the heart of the international municipal movement, initiated discussion about social reform through two overlapping sections: delegates either addressed the different ways that towns could be planned, or the organisation of communal life.

The book consists of written papers from many experts on different topics, ranging from the provision of public gardens to town extension planning to Otlet's bold proposal to host a world city, 'Un projet grandiose de Cité Internationale'. It is very much a document that espouses the importance of planning to better manage urban society. The book, beautifully produced, is a fabulous addition to the international series, edited by Helen Meller, of influential planning texts from around the world. The light editorial touch usefully preserves the text in its original form: it is inconsistently paginated; lacks a coherent structure; and reads like the organisers rushed to publication, but *that is the point* – as a material product, it encapsulates the frenzy of the nascent international movement as it was institutionalizing *at the time*. Otlet himself writes how municipal authorities faced a growing challenge in documenting their records, noting that the best solution was to learn from the experiences of other institutions like the Congrès Internationale des Sciences Administratives. The book thus represents a step into the unknown world of municipal internationalism where, for those present, collaboration and sharing were the key tools for building a better society. This book keeps this wonderful spirit alive.

This book should be read in conjunction with the more coherent *Transactions of the Royal Institute of British Architects Town Planning Conference*, held in London in 1910, which is also included in the series. Together, they vividly illustrate the emergence of the 'Urban Internationale' of people, institutions and tools to study the 'modern city' during the twentieth century. Singularly, *Ghent Planning Congress* is an important record of proceedings for this historic moment in the international planning movement. It is also – as a section on the proposed organisation of a permanent congress of towns exemplifies – a record of the origins of the intermunicipalist network because it marks the formation of the Union Internationale des Villes (UIV), which subsequently influenced later dialogue about municipal administration, particularly during the inter-war years when the fate of democratic local self-government was under threat. It is a significant document for marking, in the words of the organisers themselves, 'une première étape vers une étude internationale et comparative' (xi) of cities and local authorities.

William Whyte's introduction is excellent. He is critical of the document itself ('a poorly produced and apparently intractable text' (v)), whilst documenting the fast-changing context within which the organisers cobbled it together. He also discusses the contemporary responses to the Congress, noting how little attention it received in the professional press. Particularly helpful for readers are the short biographies provided for the speakers, which save a lot of time in tracking down some of the lesser-known participants.

The proceedings themselves list the various delegates, categorised into representatives of government, unions of towns, and professional associations. Towards the end, the secretariat-general provides a useful list of documentary sources on urban administration, organised by country. This points towards some of the best work that the UIV subsequently did as a clearing house for municipal information. The proceedings also hint at the coming age of statistical information with papers from the statisticians Ugo Giusti and Paul Meuriot. Meuriot's paper, 'The general progress of the major cities in Europe from 1800 to the present day', expertly frames many of the issues that the professionals subsequently tackled. It is a pity that the organisers buried it in the middle portion of the programme, and didn't give it the prominence it deserved.

Multiple diverse voices were heard during the Congress, addressing a variety of practical topics, interspersed with more idealistic talks about future planning scenarios. What links all the participants is their resounding belief in the necessity of technocratic expertise and the development of a scientific approach to manage urban problems. As Frank Koester puts it in his excellent paper, the modern city 'is in fact a great factory', the conditions of which were dependent on the 'technical experience' of the engineer and the planner, as well as the 'aesthetic technique' of the landscape designer and architect. Notable speakers, their papers reproduced, include Joseph Stübben, George Pepler, Patrick Abercrombie, Raymond Unwin, Edgard Milhaud, and Adolphe-Augustin Rey. Planning historians, and those with interests in transnational history, will obviously be interested. The volume paints a picture of an evolving professional voice amongst planners, engineers and architects. There is also a good focus on planning in colonial cities – with papers on Indian, North African and Latin American cities.

The book would make an excellent addition to any research library and should be consulted by researchers interested in the development of international local government and the international planning movement. It also looks at home on my bookshelf alongside similarly formative works in planning and international local government by T.C. Horsfall, George Montagu Harris and J.C. Nettlefold.

Shane Ewen

Leeds Beckett University