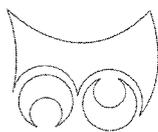


TOWN PLANS IN PLACE AND TIME

Extension Planning and Conservation
in the 1909 Copenhagen International Competition

HÉLÈNE VACHER



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PREFACE

1908 was an important year for Danish city planning. The ongoing international debate on city planning rested on the late 19th century's intense city development. Cities grew and so did Copenhagen. Around 1900 peasants flocked to Copenhagen. They became workers and moved into the rapidly growing former suburbs, the areas outside the Copenhagen city gates. Copenhagen grew at an unprecedented speed. Those who governed at the City Hall at that time had been far-sighted. The City bought up land also outside the city limit and in 1901-02 a series of rural districts surrounding Copenhagen was incorporated in the Copenhagen government – towns such as Brønshøj, Valby and Husum.

An international city planning movement had emerged and some of the most important works were actually prepared during this period with slum districts, lack of light and air and speculators who instead of creating functional and beautiful cities gained huge profits.

In 1889, Camillo Sitte wrote “Der städte-bau nach seinen künstlerrischen Grundsätzen” and in 1902-04, Ebenezer Howard wrote “City of Tomorrow”. In the same period many large European cities such as Vienna (1893), Helsingfors (1899), Helsingborg (1906) and Berlin (1910) arranged competitions on how the rapidly growing cities could be planned to avoid the slum of the 19th century. The same took place in Copenhagen where an international competition on how to plan the incorporated towns was arranged in 1908.

19 projects were submitted – the Germans won with a project made by K. Strinz, which was characterised by the asymmetric and limited squares. The squares were considered areas for the citizens, not for traffic, in fact quite a modern perception. However, it was not the winning project that was implemented, but the Danish project that came in second in the competition.

Historically, other countries have always inspired Copenhagen at times when the City was to expand. As was the case in the seventeenth century when the Dutch planned Christianshavn, and in the eighteenth century when Frederiksstad was on the drawing board. The inspiration came from France. And when the Ørestad was in its initial phase at the end of the twentieth century, the inspiration came from Finland just as the ongoing planning of the Copenhagen Port is greatly influenced by Dutch ideas. This inspiration which Denmark has always benefited by, may well have been at its highest in the early twentieth century when the European city planning became modern. And it is this story that Hélène Vacher with great insight has told in her book and which makes you reflect on how Copenhagen is to develop in the future, when the City is facing major renewals of huge and old industrial areas. Thank you for the inspiration.

Holger Bisgaard
Chief Planner, City of Copenhagen

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INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century Copenhagen gained its present limits by annexing most of its surrounding boroughs. The incorporated districts were then highly rural and did not add much to the population of the capital, but they tripled its area. The large extension of 1901-1902 was thus an important turning point in the Danish capital's physical transformation. Less than 50 years elapsed since the City of Copenhagen had been allowed to expand freely into the large tracks of lands that for a long period had been frozen by the fortifications of the monarch's residence. Whereas the removal of the ring of defences led to an open competition in Vienna in 1858, a similar grand gesture did not materialise in the realm of Denmark. Instead, Copenhagen's extension had been the result of negotiations between the City government and the State's administrations.¹ In this respect, the publication of the programme for an international contest to plan the Danish capital in early 1908 was not only a symbol of forward-looking municipal authorities, but a symbol of the expectations of recapturing the past as well.

This book deals with the international competition for the Copenhagen extension plan held in 1908-1909. It presents a survey of many facets of the event, ranging in perspective from institutional, professional and biographical aspects to design strategies and technical issues in relation to urban form and town plan. In providing a detailed exploration of the competition, the purpose of this book is to draw attention to a significant landmark in the history of Danish town planning, and, more broadly, to suggest that competitions for town planning can provide entrées to a large number of aspects of both a discipline and practice over

time. The contest was also a forum, which polarised rival views of past and present, and echoed attitudes toward the then existing city whose tangible relics and landscape were identified as both historical marks and cultural heritage. Although the challenge was to convene various assessments of the issues to be faced by a 'Great City' through as many various aesthetic representations of the expansion of the capital with reference to the models of the time – from the garden-city to the compact-blocks town, including the picturesque style or the Beaux-Arts tradition – how to integrate the inherited built forms and landscapes was of chief concern to most of the entries. How town planning had been shaped in convergence with the broad Danish movement for the preservation of nature, cityscape and old buildings in the early years of the twentieth century is another major theme that is discussed in this book.

With a total of nineteen proposals gathering 31 competitors from six different countries, the Copenhagen contest provides a fairly representative sample of the professional milieus involved in the 'technique of town plans' in Denmark and its regional environment in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. With entrants such as Niels Gellersted, Karl Strinz, Hans Bernoulli or Alfred Raavad, who also submitted to the open international competitions for Great Berlin (1908-1910) or Canberra (1911-1912), the Copenhagen contest had been in the mainstream of the international town planning movement. It ran parallel with others major events such as the opening of the Great Berlin competition, the passing of the 1909 Town-Planning Act in England, and Burnham & Bennett's plan for Chicago the same year. That was soon followed by the international Antwerp competition, the Berlin town-planning congress cum exhibition and the London town planning conference, all in 1910, to name but a few. Other important ral-

1 On this period, see Thomas Hall, *Planning Europe's Capital Cities-Aspects of Nineteenth Century Urban Development*, London, 1997, p.158-167.

lies like the competitions for the new capital of Australia and the Ruhr financial centre in 1912, or the Ghent Exhibition in 1913, marked the climax of this international movement. In this context, Scandinavian cities took similar initiatives, such as Gothenburg in 1901, Hälsingborg in 1906, Trondheim in 1910 as well as Oslo the same year, though the latter competition did not come to fruition. Further East, Helsinki in 1898 and 1901 and Tallinn in 1913 held significant contests as well. In Sweden a 'genuine town planning Act' was enforced in 1907.² From the perspective of an international planning movement, which had been sustained by the frequency of close contacts through congresses, exhibitions, and competitions, the Nordic region was well entrenched in this import and export flow of ideas, experiences and planning principles.

The Copenhagen competition can be understood as part of an international process of mutual emulation toward the 'Greater city' or the 'metropolis'. It was, however, urged by local and genuine ambition to address the manifold transformations of the city. Between 1873 and 1906, the population of Copenhagen and its neighbouring communes had doubled and almost reached half a million mark. The mid-nineteenth century's royal residence moving at the tempo of the officers' duties and recreations while the guilds beat the rhythm of economic activities were things of the past. In contrast to the long-standing ruin of Christiansborg Palace that burnt to ashes in 1888, the erection of the large Town Hall in 1895-1905, praised abroad for its sophisticated architecture, was a testimony of assertive civic pride. The ruins of the castle in the inner city and the majestic new seat of the City Council on the freshly removed earthworks of the fortifications expressed the important undergoing changes in the social and political life of the kingdom.

A bustling and promising modernity was gaining ground with major urban works, including a comprehensive sewage system, a new railways central sta-

tion and harbour extensions, which accompanied a decisive boost in industrial and commercial activities in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. While Copenhagen gained a strong economic prominence in relation to the other Danish towns, its urban polarities underwent a rapid and significant change. Especially since 1895, the inner city's population had steadily declined, while housing building had mushroomed outside the former line of fortification. This urbanisation was usually depicted as ugly, unhealthy and ill equipped, save for a few residential villas areas. Thus, there were many grounds for the City government to wish to take control of the capital's spatial growth, including the development of the large tracks of land that the municipality had purchased both within and outside its boundaries in the 1890s.

Although the rich literature devoted to Copenhagen and its town planning history often refers to the competition in 1908-1909 and its prize winning plans, the contest has not been thoroughly investigated.³ As a whole, town-planning competitions have seldom been researched as a subject in their own right, but for a few works with an attendant emphasis on model-founding winning entries.⁴ The importance of town planning contests for the planning historiography is, however, outlined in a number of studies, and is in-

2 See Thomas Hall, "Urban planning in Sweden", in T. Hall (ed.), *Planning and Urban Growth in the Nordic Countries*, London, 1991, p.180.

3 Among the major studies on the development of town planning in Denmark, see Arne Gaardmand, *Dansk byplanlægning 1938-1992*, Copenhagen, 1993. Tim Knudsen, *Storbyen Støbes, København mellem kaos og byplan 1840-1917*, Copenhagen, 1988. For a general overview, see Knud Bidstrup, *Ebenezer's disciple, fra dansk byplanlægnings pionertid*, Copenhagen, 1971. Prior to these works two studies should be mentioned for their analysis of the competition, Olaf Forchhammer (red.), *København-De indlemmede Distrikter byplanmæssig Udvikling til 1840*, Copenhagen, 1947, p. 21-30; and Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *København-et bysamfunds særpræg og udvikling gennem tiderne*, Copenhagen, 1994, p. 139-149. For a general review on research literature on Scandinavian countries, see Thomas Hall, "Planning history: recent developments in the Nordic countries, with special reference to Sweden", in *Planning Perspectives*, 1994, Vol.9, N. 2, p. 153-179. A broad introduction to the "Romantic" period in the Nordic countries is given by Helleni Porfyriou, "Artistic Urban Design and Cultural Myths: The Garden City Idea in Nordic Countries, 1900-1925", *Planning Perspectives*, 1992, Vol. 7, p. 263-301

4 The work of John W. Reys on Canberra encompasses the bulk of the entries: *Canberra 1912: Plans and Planners of the Australian Capital Competition*, Melbourne, 1997.

creasingly being recognised as a promising field of study that should provide insight into the practice and theory of urban development. This field is also a relevant domain of research in relation to the professional culture of the many occupational groups involved in town planning.⁵ The engulfed continent of 'paper towns' can be approached as part of the corpus upon which professional practices have drawn for knowledge, inspiration and identity. 'Virtual cities' also reflect the changing views of professional bodies and social institutions on to the shaping of representations of the city in the course of time. There are thus valuable heritages of urban culture.

There are obvious obstacles to the investigation of such a topic. To begin with, original documentation is a prerequisite, and it should encompass all entries to allow research to uncover the character of a competition and explore the wealth of ideas and techniques, which had been conceived at one time for one place. But usually, the organisers only kept the winning prize entries, which they had paid for. Thus a great many of the other submissions are not easy to be found. Hence studies that have attempted a systematic probe of historical sequences of graphic documents relating to a single city mostly rely on a limited number of entries.

The competition process developed as an important instrument of city management, especially in Central and Northern Europe, since the nineteenth century.⁶ It has been suggested that organising competitions played a significant role in establishing the decision making process of planning in which many conflicting interests were entangled. The contests have

also been pointed out as an instrument for generating innovations and favouring the diffusion and acceptance of ideas and general guidelines for urban intervention. Competitions were the subject of wide attention, especially through press coverage. In the focus of professional practices contending with each other, competitions provided the circumstances for a strong interplay between professional and administrative bodies. In their heyday, that is about 1880-1914, competitions crystallised public debate and acted as a medium, although always an ephemeral one, for the idea of an urban community through the mirror of a collective challenge centred on the issues of town development and transformation. The dimension of celebration was propitious for the local authorities while they were striving for ambitious schemes and looking for public recognition to perform the role of a mediator for various interests and expectations in relation to new urban rationality and new visions of urbanity all together.

Nonetheless, it has been shown that competitions had been the continuously subjects of heavy and recurrent criticisms.⁷ An ill-prepared programme or unclear purposes of the work's assignment, an obscure system of evaluation or an a priori orientation of the jury panels are among the defaults that have been pinpointed. Due to the considerable work input demanded of the participants, the meagre return of the whole exercise, be it in terms of financial compensations or of some kind of contract in relation to the eventual execution, led to a sceptical stand toward this so-called 'challenge of excellence', especially when no execution whatsoever came from it. Another ambiguous character of competitions has been outlined, namely their role in promoting a narrow professional elite, which by being regularly co-opted into the evaluating panels, had been inclined to emphasise its own values and, accordingly pre-emptively discourage the emergence of new ideas, a process in contrast to the very aim of competition.

The Copenhagen and Berlin competitions took place at a time when experiences and competence had

5 In relation to the competitions during the years 1890-1914, it has been remarked that "competitions have been virtually ignored in urban and planning historiography": Peter Breiting, "The role of the competition in the genesis of urban planning: Germany and Austria in the nineteenth century", in Anthony Sutcliffe (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Urban Planning 1800-1914*, London, 1980, p. 31-54: 31. Since then general introductions to planning history have included substantial aspects on competitions, as for instance: Jean Dethier & Alain Guiheux, *La ville, art et architecture en Europe, 1870-1993*, Paris, 1994.

6 See, Anthony Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City, Germany, Britain, the United States and France, 1780-1914*, Oxford, 1991, p. 27-35.

7 See Heidede Becker, *Geschichte der Architektur und Städtebauwettbewerbe*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln, 1992. Though the book focuses on architectural competitions, it sketches the history of extension competitions in Germany.