Concrete Dreams: The Built Environment and Human Behavior in Europe's Twentieth Century

Andreas Greiner
German Historical Institute Washington

Jan Hansen
University of California San Diego

Paul Lerner
University of Southern California

Introduction

The devastating wildfires that swept through Pacific Palisades and Altadena in early January 2025 exposed the ecological fragility and vulnerability of the Los Angeles region and highlighted the effects of escalating climate change. Furthermore, they underscored how natural forces — wildfires, earthquakes, and floods — can overwhelm even highly-developed societies like the United States.[1] For many of those living and working in Southern California, these events were a stark reminder of the "agency" of natural forces and the physical world. Scholars have long examined the connection between

1 Natalie Rauscher and Welf Werner, *Natural Disasters in the United States: Making Sense of Risks and Vulnerability* (London: Springer Nature, forthcoming).

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environmental disasters and the city of Los Angeles.[2] However, this relationship felt particularly urgent in the wake of our Los Angeles-based workshop, *Concrete Dreams: Urban Infrastructure and the Regulation of Human Behavior in the Global Twentieth Century*, held at the University of Southern California in May 2023.[3] This workshop sparked discussions on how twentieth-century urban infrastructure projects in Europe, the United States, and beyond were designed to influence human behavior. This thematic *Forum* in the GHI's *Bulletin* continues that dialogue by featuring contributions on this topic, including three papers originally presented at the workshop.

The forum explores the complex interplay between the built environment and human behavior. The contributions examine how architecture and infrastructure have shaped societal expectations and behaviors across diverse geographical contexts. Key areas of interest include Paris's tramway network, penal agricultural colonies in nineteenth-century France and early Soviet Ukraine, government offices in the Westminster district of London, and the coalfields surrounding Leipzig, Germany. More specifically, the contributions delve into visions of social progress and advancement through efforts to marginalize the urban poor by using transport infrastructures to exclude them from city centers; ideals of achieving moral reform through youth incarceration; the enhancement of white-collar productivity and efficiency through the architectural design of office towers; and fossil-fuel extraction, often while neglecting the health consequences for local populations. Taken together, these papers examine how architects, planners, politicians, penal reformers, judges, journalists, and ordinary people tried to shape social relations through the built environment. Questions of control and surveillance within the built environment, alongside the unintended consequences of such behavioral regulation, also reverberate throughout these papers.

The central premise of this forum's contributions is that the built environment offers a vital lens for exploring broader

2 Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York, 1998).

3 Andreas Greiner, Jan Hansen, and Paul Lerner, "Concrete Dreams: Infrastructure and the Regulation of Behavior in the Global Twentieth Century," workshop report, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 72 (2023): 129–136.

historical questions about societies — their norms, moral standards, systems of inclusion and exclusion, and overall functioning. We contend that social orders are not only embedded within physical structures, profoundly shaping how people lived, worked, consumed, and raised families, but that the built environment actively reinforces and transforms these social systems.[4] Beyond recognizing that physical structures have effects, the forum's contributions emphasize the affective dimensions of the built environment — the expectations, promises, and aspirations attached to architectural and infrastructural developments.[5] This perspective enables our authors to investigate how spaces were deliberately designed to guide or modify human behavior and the consequences — both intended and otherwise — of these interventions. By examining the intersections of physical spaces and social dynamics, this forum aims to deepen our understanding of how environments shape — and are shaped by — human experiences.

To achieve these goals, the papers in this forum draw on a rich body of scholarship. Beginning in the 1970s, the "spatial turn" in historical writing has brought about a new understanding of the formation and organization of the physical environment, treating space not as a mere geographical entity but as a product of social and cultural transactions. In his seminal work *The Production of Space* (1974), the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre famously established that "(social) space is a (social) product,"[6] created by historical actors and their relations. In turn, space itself is "both produced and productive,"[7] insofar as spatial arrangements also shape and influence social interactions. Recognizing that the spatial order has the capacity to govern behaviors and influence circulation, modern statehood since the eighteenth century has sought to organize and control spaces in order to exercise power over populations. Municipal and national administrations have restructured spaces in ways that facilitated policing and control. The French philos-

4 Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 1015–1045.

5 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–343.

6 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK, 1991), 26.

7 Ibid., 288. For an introduction to Lefebvre's work, see Harvey Molotch, "The Space of Lefebvre," *Theory and Society* 22 (1993): 887–895.

opher Michel Foucault famously engaged with the historical mechanisms used to monitor, classify, and order people. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he argued that in the modern era spatial reconfiguration became a key method for disciplining and surveilling populations, with novel institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons emerging as central disciplinary spaces.[8] Foucault's analytical framework has since been widely adopted and elaborated upon. The political theorist Timothy Mitchell, for instance, has highlighted how European colonizers in mid-nineteenth century Egypt "enframed" the rural population to foster state control by rearranging village landscapes.[9] In a similar vein, the American anthropologist James C. Scott, studying urban planning from Baron Haussmann's Paris to Brasília and Le Corbusier's unrealized Plan Voisin, contended that modern states have tended to increase the "legibility" of the cityscape, that is to streamline and regulate complexities to facilitate the management of its inhabitants and intervention into their activities.[10]

Urban planners and reformers indeed regarded regulating the built environment as a means of directing or controlling human behavior. Analyzing urban reconstruction from the medieval era to the interwar years, the American historian and critic Lewis Mumford reasoned in 1938 that "the improvement of cities is no matter for small one-sided reforms: the task of city design involves the vaster task of rebuilding our civilization."[11] This idea that spatial intervention could effect human betterment was shared widely, and the scope of architectural reform movements was international, with knowledge and practices circulating on a global scale through publications, congresses, and exhibitions.[12] In the late nineteenth century, social engineering meant fostering changes in demography and hygiene. Sanitizing the overcrowded urban centers of industrialized Europe by ventilating the cities, developing sewage systems, establishing parks, and restructuring urban layouts was a prime preoccupation of planners, whose spatial

8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; New York, 1995).

9 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).

10 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

11 Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938; New York, 1970), 9.

12 Anthony Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City, Germany, Britain, the United States and France, 1780–1914*. Oxford, 1981; Stephen V. Ward, "Re-Examining the International Diffusion of Planning," in *Urban Planning in a Changing World: The Twentieth Century Experience*, ed. Robert Freestone (London, 2000), 40–66; David Kuchenbuch, "Architecture and Urban Planning as Social Engineering: Selective Transfers between Germany and Sweden in the 1930s and 1940s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51 (2016): 22–39.

interventions were soon replicated in the colonial world.[13] Social reform was also at the heart of the Garden City movement and its efforts to decentralize urban living.[14]

Intervention into the built environment and people's everyday use of it did not remain uncontested. Urban reconstruction led to evictions, the marginalization of neighborhoods, and racial and class segregation. In the United States, the shift away from city centers and the ensuing process of suburbanization, highly criticized by Mumford and American architecture critic Jane Jacobs, accelerated these processes.[15] Sprawling suburbs became only possible through individual motorization from the 1940s onwards — when the number of car owners in the United States exceeded that of all other countries combined.[16] The ubiquity of cars engendered a process of urban reconstruction that pushed other forms of mobility, especially walking, to the side of the road. In the postwar boom phase, car ownership and suburban development then called for new broad thoroughfares into city centers, making African-American neighborhoods the prey of bulldozers.[17] Thus enlisted into the project of automobility, urban space increasingly came to govern mobility through the implementation of signage systems, parking, and traffic rules. After its introduction, urban driving competed with other forms of mobility, leading to the criminalization of "jaywalking."[18]

The contributions to this forum serve as case studies probing the bidirectional relationship between the built environment and human behavior. In the first paper, Peter Soppelsa turns to

13 Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830–1910*. (Oxford, UK, 1987); Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, 2000); Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Malden, MA, 2007); William Cunningham Bissell, *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar* (Bloomington, IN, 2011); Aro Velmet, *Pasteur's Empire: Bacteriology and Politics in France, Its Colonies, and the World* (Oxford, UK, 2020); Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).

14 Dirk Schubert, "The Neighbourhood Paradigm: From Garden Cities to Gated Communities," in *Urban Planning in a Changing World*, ed. Freestone, 118–138.

15 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961; New York, 1993).

16 Thomas Zeller, *Consuming Landscapes: What We See When We Drive and Why It Matters*, (Baltimore, 2022), 17.

17 Derek G. Handley, *Struggle for the City: Citizenship and Resistance in the Black Freedom Movement* (University Park, PA, 2024); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA, 2004)

18 Peter D. Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*. (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Gabrielle Esperdy, *American Autopia* (Charlottesville, VA, 2019); Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis, 2006).

Third Republic Paris and the arrival of the new metropolitan tramways to demonstrate previously unacknowledged popular engagement in and protest both for and against new urban modes of transportation. While voices from the left cheered the democratizing effect of new forms of public transportation at the end of the nineteenth century, which made the city core accessible for members of the working-class and thus created new opportunities, conservatives decried the trolleys as a threat to civilization and a blight on the beautiful Parisian cityscape. As the new trams transformed the built environment and popular experiences of the city, observers debated and recast the meaning of Frenchness in terms of Paris' Roman heritage, its position as a beacon of "civilization" and an imperial metropolis, and its resistance to the forces of Americanization.

Anna-Christine Grant's essay focuses on penitentiary institutions for juvenile offenders in two disparate contexts, nineteenth-century France and early Soviet Ukraine, investigating two colonies whose creators touted the influence of environment on human behavior. Nineteenth-century French ideas about rehabilitation, the salutary effect of the rural, and the positive influence of a well-ordered environment also inhered in penal and educational reform movements in Imperial Russia and persisted but took on a different valence after the October Revolution. While earlier French reformers construed wayward youth as an urban population in need of distance from the morally corrosive city and the corrective influence of a well-ordered agricultural colony, in the Soviet context, where urban modernity was celebrated in contrast to the allegedly backwards countryside, youth residents of the Gorky colony were seen as the beneficiaries of modern planning, rationality, and efficiency.

The third contribution, by Juliana Kei, turns to the establishment of the Department of the Environment in 1970 in the United Kingdom, an amalgam of existing governmental bodies tasked with the improvement of British life through

interventions in the environment. She points to the ambiguity and slippage in the meaning of the term "environment" which originally referred to urban spaces that were to be transformed through rational planning and construction, and not to the natural world and planet, as in more recent usage. Paradoxically, the establishment of the Department of the Environment actually presaged the state's withdrawal from attempts to rationally manage the built environment, as modernist ideas lost credibility and Thatcherite privatization began to hold sway. Lack of a coherent notion of "the environment," Kei argues, was one of the factors that prevented the state from mounting any effective interventions into quality of life.

In the *Forum's* final article, Andrew Demshuk takes us from the main streets of Britain's new towns to the abandoned coal fields of the former GDR, Saxon wastelands scarred from decades of lignite pit mining which defied generations of planners' dreams of transforming the pockmarked fields into a salubrious landscape to improve its residents' lives. Demshuk's is a story of utopian visions giving way to bureaucratic realities in the East German and then the reunited German state, which at last brought significant financial resources to older reclamation projects but also proved unable to undo the effects of natural devastation, falling prey to a hubristic belief in humanity's ability to bend nature to its will.

Taken together, the papers reveal the rich and intense struggles over attempts to reshape the built environment over the last two centuries of European history and also the limits of humanity's power to intervene against stubborn social and natural forces, exposing both the attraction and the limits of the modernist dream of rationality, order, and surveillance. These papers, we believe, represent just the beginning of a promising new research area at the intersection of environmental history, architectural and planning history, and the history of the human sciences and governmentality. Future avenues could include expanding the investigation to a

global perspective, with a particular focus on non-European contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, including forceful attempts to reshape the colonial world under the imperial European gaze.[19] Additionally, the intersectionality of categories of difference warrants further exploration, as for instance, the gendered dynamics of behavioral control through the built environment, a topic hinted at in the essays at hand, and explored more substantially in several of the workshop papers. What notions of masculinity and femininity were associated with these efforts to influence human behavior? To what extent did the built environment itself become gendered? How did it reify but also potentially undermine differences of class, race, and ethnicity? What sorts of continuities can be located across the boundaries of the Cold War at the intersection of global development, infrastructure, and the regulation of behavior? The contributions to this forum represent, we hope, a significant first step in identifying and exploring this rich and urgent field of inquiry.

19 See, for example, Andrew Denning, *Automotive Empire: How Cars and Roads Fueled European Colonialism into Africa* (Ithaca, NY, 2024).

Andreas Greiner is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington. His research specializes in infrastructure networks, their spatiality and materiality in the long 19th and early 20th centuries. He received his PhD in history from ETH Zurich. Before joining the GHI in January 2021, he was a postdoctoral fellow in the Max Weber Program at the European University Institute in Florence. His first monograph, *Human Porterage and Colonial State Formation in German East Africa, 1880s–1914: Tensions of Transport* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), explores the shifting role of caravan transport and human porterage in colonial East Africa, revealing the resilience of precolonial structures in the era of "high imperialism." His current research project examines the entangled history of intercontinental airline networks in the interwar period.

Jan Hansen is a Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of History at UC San Diego, sponsored by the

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). He is also a Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter (research fellow and lecturer) in the Department of History at Humboldt University of Berlin, currently on leave. A historian of modern Germany, Europe, and the United States, his research and teaching focus on infrastructure history, new materialism, the Cold War, and social movements. He is the author of *Abschied vom Kalten Krieg? Die Sozialdemokraten und der Nachrüstungsstreit (1977–1987)* (de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016). His co-authored volumes include *Making Sense of the Americas: How Protest Related to America in the 1980s and Beyond* (Campus, 2015); *Den Kalten Krieg vermessen: Über Reichweite und Alternativen einer binären Ordnungsvorstellung* (de Gruyter, 2018); *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe* (Open Book Publishers, 2023); and *Historische Friedens- und Konfliktforschung: Die Quadratur des Kreises?* (Campus, 2023). He is currently completing his second book, *Anatomy of the Mundane: Living with Infrastructure in Los Angeles, 1850–1940*.

Paul Lerner is a Professor and Chair of History in the Van Hunnick History Department at USC where he directs the Max Kade Institute for Austrian-German-Swiss Studies. He is a historian of Modern Germany and Central Europe with particular research and teaching interests in the history of the human sciences, Jewish history, the history and theory of consumer culture, and theories of fascism. He has written two books: *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany* (Cornell, 2003) and *The Consuming Temple: The Jewish Department Store and the Consumer Revolution in Germany* (Cornell 2015) and co-edited four books: *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 2001), *Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History* (Indiana, 2012), *Feuchtwanger and Judaism: History, Imagination, Exile* (Peter Lang, 2019), and *Jewish Consumer Cultures*

in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe and North America (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Lerner is currently working on two book projects: "Exiles on Main Street: How Central European Émigrés Reimagined American Life, 1940-1970" and "The Psychoanalysis of Terror: Fred Hacker between Vienna and Hollywood."