Methods of Urban History

Zeynep Celik is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University. She is the author of The Remaking of Istanbul, Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century (Seattle and London, 1986) and is currently working on a book on the architectural representation of Islam in world’s fairs.

Diane Favro is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Architecture and Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her current projects include a monograph on Augustan Rome and a book on Julia Morgan.

The current academic and popular interest in urban history is accompanied by methodological explorations. Paralleling the recent trends in social history, architectural historians working on urban topics have broadened the subject matter. They now investigate social, economic, political, and cultural issues to explain the built forms of cities, thereby relying on interdisciplinary research. The focus is often on urban transformations with a wide-spread concern to address the issues and problems of today and tomorrow through studying history. While the recent methodological search in urban history is rich and inspirational, it also bears shortcomings. Methodological pluralism can easily lead to a diminution of focus and a general ambiguity, obscuring evaluation standards. The approaches surveyed here display the widening perspectives, but also point to the importance of further theoretical and methodological discussion.

Introduction
The 1980s have been a prolific time for urban history. Not only are many new books published on the topic, but also a great deal of discussion is taking place on the theory and methodology of urban history. The interest in the latter is shared by many disciplines. Recently, planners held sessions on urban history at the annual meetings of the American Planning Association and the Association of the Collegiate Schools of Planning. In 1986, architectural historians discussed the methodologies of urban history at the yearly Society of Architectural Historians meeting; in 1987 they examined the physical texts of cities. Historians had their own panels on methods of urban analysis at the conference of the Organization of American Historians; they also coordinated seminars dedicated to the topic. These debates show that the questions of content, theory, and method in urban history are not well-defined and established matters, but are in a formative and searching stage.

This on-going exploration is what we seek to display here. In order to investigate the multicultural nature of the field, we asked scholars with different approaches to explain their visions of urban history. Our concern lay not only with methods and goals, but also with prioritization of issues, sources, presentation techniques, and targeted audiences. The focus is on methodology. Nevertheless, this is not an abstraction of method from content. As the following essays demonstrate, it is the content which gives form to methodology. While the essays represent a sampling of current trends, they share a common denominator reflecting our own bias as architectural historians: all look at the physicality of urban environments.

The first five authors in this series are architectural historians who employ techniques, knowledge, and methods from other disciplines. Gwenda Lyn Wright’s approach is multidisciplinary. She draws from social, economic, political, and intellectual as well as architectural history. Paolo Polledri here emphasizes the contribution of economic and social data to the understanding of eighteenth-century Venice. George Gorse relies on familial records to illustrate the evolution of urban spaces in medieval Genoa. Dora Crouch calls for a reappraisal of archaeological methods to accommodate the questions asked by architectural historians. William MacDonald exploits the traditional sources and methods of art historians to create a comprehensive interpretation of Roman architecture and urbanism.

The next four essays are by authors who were trained in fields other than art or architectural history, yet who draw from these disciplines. As a professor of English, William McClung looks at cities in literature, seeking a balance between the ideal narrated images and the praxis. Marc Weiss, urban planner, studies a subdivision of urban history, the history of real-estate development. Paul Groth, urban geographer, is interested in what he calls “cultural landscapes,” with an emphasis on ordinary environments. His focus is physical and his approach is multidisciplinary. Dolores Hayden, historian of planning, looks at urban history with an active political orientation. She chooses a past for Los Angeles which involves ethnic minorities and women, thereby taking a step to counterbalance the uniform disposition of Anglo-American histories.

In undertaking this survey of individual approaches to urban history, our goal was not to propose methodological parameters for urban history, but rather to identify trends and future directions. Above all, these essays demonstrate the tremendous range possible in this subject area. Our sampling encompasses the generalism of Wright, the particularism of Crouch, the quantitative analysis of Polledri, the literary interest of McClung, the experiential investigation of MacDonald, the social concern of Hayden, Gorse’s interest in monu-
mental urban plazas, Groth’s in decidedly unmonumental residential hotels, and Weiss’ in pragmatic real-estate dealings.

Current Approaches

Among the disciplines involved in urban history today, social historians have perhaps been the most systematic in their analyses of theory and methodology. This is related to the development of and experimentation in the “new social history,” which originated in the 1960s. This movement was paralleled in the field of urban studies by the call for a “new urban history.” Though not uniformly defined, proponents of this front agreed that a primary characteristic of the “new urban history” was a concern with social issues.7

In 1972, E.J. Hobsbawm classified urban history as a subdivision of social history. He argued that as a “geographically limited and coherent unit,” the city provides a convenient scale for research and its analysis sheds light on technical, social, and political problems dependent on the interactions of people living in the same place. Moreover, cities reflect great social transformations better than any institutions. Hobsbawm observed that the tendency among the historians was to see urban history as a paradigm of social changes and, because of this, urban history should remain a principal concern for social historians.8

Currently, the focus on major social transformations is still pursued among historians. Oliver Zunz in his introduction to Reliving the Past (1985), discusses the state of social history and points to the social historians’ emphasis during the past two decades on “major transformations—ideological, political, economic, and social—and the form and character of lives shaped in different environments.”9

The social historians’ urban history focuses, for example, on industrialization and urbanization as catalysts of major transformations. Within this context, social historians study many aspects of social life in cities, such as neighborhood institutions, career patterns, leisure, crime and violence, the housing market, poverty, education, family life, and religion.5

Architectural historians today are also exploring a wide range of topics in relation to the city, but always with a focus on physical form. In the early 1960s, John Summerson argued for the study of the city as an artifact and called for an urban history which was “the history of the fabrics of cities.” Paralleling the discourse on social history, he emphasized the importance of social, psychological, and economic forces in the generation of urban form and the importance of their study, but postulated a history which had the “tangible substance, the stuff of the city,” thus its form, as the main issue. Summerson also made a differentiation between an urban history which concentrated on architecture at the expense of the total building output and the history of the city in its entirety. He claimed that “all buildings [were] buildings of architectural and historical interest,” but the urban historian had to go even beyond the study of all buildings and look into “the whole physical mass of marble, bricks, steel and concrete, tarmac and rubble, metal conduits and rails—the whole artifact.”6

The architectural historian’s urban history has existed for about a century now, but, as Spiro Kostof points out, this has been primarily the history of “pedigreed urban design—grand plazas and avenues, city plans, ideal city schemes done by architects.” The kind of urban history that Summerson called for is a relatively new phenomenon. The broadening of the subject matter during the past two decades, the willingness to look into other disciplines and methodological explorations all parallel the developments in social history. Today, architectural historians studying cities investigate the social, political, and economic forces that gave shape to urban environments and try to present a more complete picture. Monumental urban constructs are currently being reexamined by architectural historians anxious to understand the “why” and “how” behind the stylistic “what.” Unlike their colleagues in other disciplines, they have been involved in debates of content, theory, and method.9 Yet, their work demonstrates a wide range of exploration.

In the past decade architectural historians have begun to study non-pedigreed urban components. Today, urban vernacular is a well-accepted subject of study as represented here in the work of Paul Groth and Dolores Hayden. In this category, urban housing is a particularly popular topic. Research in urban housing often incorporates an appreciation of non-monumental physical form with a strong interest in social issues.10 This broadening of subject interest has also led to the investigation of process, that is, in how “anonymous” architecture is created. Works such as Marc Weiss’ The Rise of the Community Builders (1987) explore the evolution of non-monumental urban environments and the major proponents of the process.

The interest in social issues parallels that in economic topics, providing another obvious point of departure for the architectural historian’s expanded understanding of urban form. As Paolo Polledri shows here, patterns of daily life—so crucial to the formation and functioning of the urban forms—can be further clarified by the help of quantitative analysis. Therefore, beyond the tangible components of cities, architectural historians today are extending their inquiry to archival materials such as tax records, censuses, guild rolls, economic forecasts, and government records. This type of data lends itself well to quantification, and thus promotes the adaptation of economic models to research on historical environments.11

The expansion of the field has allowed specialists from other disciplines to...
become involved increasingly in urban history. In part, this has been sparked by literary works. Italo Calvino’s influential book, Invisible Cities (1972), stimulated interest in cities as image makers and containers of multilayered historical meanings. William McClung, for example, has added to the understanding of cities in past times by examining descriptions in literature. Despite the overt emphasis on imagery and symbolism, the physical form of cities is the most obvious point of tangency in such investigations.

Further stimulus is coming from the social sciences. Both geography and anthropology have a side interest in cities. Cultural and urban geographers are extending urban inquiries into such areas as perception, mapping, urban morphology, regionalism and distribution. Geographers, in particular, expand the physical territory of cities; they look at urban environments as regional elements, as elements of systems. Anthropologists are investigating urban rituals and the everyday life in cities. The influence of these topical foci is evident in a number of recent works, for example Edward Muir’s Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice (1981).

Cultural and economic investigations of cities have, in turn, inspired traditional historians. Contemporary urban studies by historians are generally of two types, biographies of individual cities and broad explorations centering on particular issues over time. Both approaches, historians today are concentrating more and more on the physical form; this emphasis is evident in historians’ expanded use of on-site investigations and visual material (e.g., paintings, drawings, maps, diagrams) both in research and in presentation.

In addition, urban histories in the 1980s are also affected by the interests of contemporary designers and planners. Professional journals and other works for this audience reflect practitioners’ increased concern with historical urban environments as exemplars for social, as well as formal, aspects of planning. For instance, two collections of essays on cities published by the Cooper-Hewitt Museum at the beginning of the decade freely employ references to past urban environments in the exploration of such topics as the psychology of city spaces, urban preservation, urban solar considerations, urban open space, social programming, urban legislation, urban revitalization, and urban identities.

The present decade has also witnessed a mass appeal to urban history. Popularizing books, for example, Mark Girouard’s Cities and People, A Social Architectural History (1985), bring the subject to a wide audience. In such works, historical cities become colorful actors in the broad scope of cultural evolution; urban life is described as having a vitality of its own. Indeed, richly illustrated popular urban histories form a great market and over one hundred of them have been published in the last decade. A large number of these are written by professional historians wishing to reach a broader audience. Interestingly, photographs and other visual materials are used differently by social historians than by architectural historians. While the social historians appeal to visual materials to address questions on “why their towns got started, how and why they grew, what problems they have faced, what kinds of people they have attracted, where the cities are going in our own time, and how their past has shaped the present and will continue to shape their future,” they do not elaborate much (if at all) on urban forms.

Overall, the broadening of approaches has also resulted in the examination of an extended range of source materials. While architectural historians working on urban constructs can do primary research on site, they must extend their explorations to locate information on contemporary usage, politics, economics, and cultural issues. Their sources now range from the actual physical data (existing built forms and archaeological research) to literary documents from demography and other quantitative data to oral history, as well as to pictorial documentation.

In spite of the wide spectrum of methodologies and approaches evident in contemporary urban histories, they share a geographic and temporal focus. The largest number of works explore Western topics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second in frequency are examinations of Italian Renaissance and Baroque urban environments. Third, perhaps influenced by the architectural profession’s renewed interest in classical architecture, the ancient city has come under increased scrutiny in the past decade. As a result, several early works on ancient cities have been republished in updated form. Ancient cities are studied also in new ways. William L. MacDonald in his second volume, The Architecture of the Roman Empire, An Urban Appraisal (1986), explores the architectural elements of ancient cities as urban components. Thus, along with chapters on public buildings and classicism, he includes ones on armatures, connective and passage architecture, and symbolism. With research expanding beyond individual monuments to the entire urban environment, historians are considering broad topics in relation to the ancient city. For example, Dora Crouch examines pervasive, though unglamorous, urban hydraulic systems. Other authors are concentrating on ancient cities at particular moments in time, thus emphasizing urban vitality and imagery rather than layering and evolution. In contrast, cities from other eras (e.g., medieval, eighteenth-century) and from other regions (Africa, the Middle East, South America, Northern Europe) appear infrequently in current publications.

Regardless of the differences in focus and methodology, one theme emerges as the common denominator among
urban historians: the study of urban change. Nevertheless, as Gwendolyn Wright states, describing urban change through major figures is no longer enough and historians’ task today is to explain the meaning of this change. Urban transformations should not necessarily be understood as radical and oversweeping, but as Paolo Polledri shows, smaller changes can lead to a major impact and illustrate a dynamic urbanism not apparent at first sight.

Another concern which many urban historians share is how to study urban history in a manner which addresses the issues and problems of today, as well as the future. Periods of transformation therefore gain additional importance as they shed light on the cultural complexities of cities at critical times. The most concrete and activist agenda in this framework comes from Dolores Hayden, who sees in urban history greater possibilities than in architectural history. In her work on Los Angeles, she explores ways in which the new social history can be incorporated into contemporary urban design and urban preservation. This is a unique way of studying urban history as social critique.

Conclusion
There is no one dominant approach to urban history, nor should there be. As complex constructs, cities merit complex methods of analysis. After generations of research, we now have sufficient data on past urban environments to allow examination from many angles: sociological, political, formal, aesthetic, economic, and so on. Faced with such options, contemporary scholars are challenging the traditional methods of their respective fields and experimenting with those of other disciplines. The sampling of approaches evident in the essays presented here, in recent urban histories, and in current periodicals affirms the desire for a reevaluation of existing field-specific methodologies and for the formulation of an interdisciplinary process.

Nevertheless, this healthy search also bears potential shortcomings, which once more parallel those in social history. Social history has an ambiguous content because of its multifaceted nature and tends to be on whatever the historian chooses to write. Zunz has noted that in social history, “the absence of a clear program, except that of enlarging the scope of history, led to fragmentation and a diminished focus.” and social historians, in their search for new methodologies, used approaches from other disciplines uncritically. The problems diagnosed so clearly by social historians manifest themselves in our survey of urban history as well, and warn us about some of the liabilities of our own experiments.

Like social history, urban history is whatever the author makes it. The field’s scope and the degree to which it incorporates or borrows from other disciplines varies widely. On one end of the scale, we have the comprehensive and generalist approach (G. Wright), and on the other very specific and strictly defined themes in urban history (D. Crouch and M. Weiss). The “multifaceted nature” leading to an “ambiguous content” reflects also on the goals of urban historians. A politically activist approach which consciously “selects” the topic (D. Hayden) falls as much within the realm of urban history as “passive” analysis based on quantitative data (P. Polledri). The relevance of the social historians’ concern for the ways in which methodologies are borrowed from other disciplines is expressed explicitly by P. Groth who tells us that in his struggle to collect and organize data, he “borrowed techniques from social history.” Other authors implicitly assume the incorporation of social factors into their work (G. Gorse). Indeed, the architectural historians and planners interested in the history of built form seem to experiment with techniques from virtually every discipline. The scope of their investigations ranges from synthetic approaches which embrace social, political, economic, cultural, and architectural histories (G. Wright), to those which unilaterally rely on a single other discipline (P. Polledri and D. Crouch).

The nature of sources is of critical importance. In this formative stage, sources seem to determine the methods and the content to a large degree. Therefore, what is available, what the researcher runs into “by chance,” and what is intentionally “selected” directly affect the historical analysis and the narrative. The reconstruction inevitably reflects some arbitrariness. Moreover, as sources cannot be abstracted from their creators or recorders, they are not value-free in themselves.

Such pluralism has its drawbacks. The breadth of possible topical and methodological options can be too heady. Researchers today over and over express excitement at the “newness” of their viewpoints and approaches. Too easily, novelty can breed superficiality and, in particular, a diminution of focus. Urban investigators with a specialization in one area lack familiarity with basic source material and methods in secondary fields; they are easily misled. Further, the intermingling of methodologies blurs definitions and obscures standards of evaluation. With few standards, methodological rigor can suffer. All authors seem to be making disciplines as they go along, because no a priori method exists.

While demonstrating great enthusiasm to develop and employ new methods, urban historians have not yet made a genuine effort to test the validity of their approaches and they have not questioned the potential problems of importation from other disciplines or creation on the spot. Indeed, one of the major questions rising from this survey is the state of communication between disciplines. The animated exchange of methods from one subject field promotes an interdisciplinary approach to the subject of urban history, but the individual essays...
only tentatively reflect such an emphasis. Without further discussion of methods and the establishment of guidelines for evaluation, the so-called interdisciplinary approach may serve merely as a free-for-all justification for loose scholarship. It is perhaps this ambiguity in the state of the art that resulted in the overall methodological agreement among the essays here, alarming in an otherwise critically oriented field.

Further, the experimental nature of the exchange between different academic disciplines often results in a fragmented vision. Proponents of interdisciplinary exchange seem to borrow from closely complementary areas. For example, a historian feels more comfortable using the data and methods of another social scientist. By focusing on particular approaches, researchers continue to limit the types of material they consider. In general, we find that social historians do not refer to urban form, which thus remains in the realm of architectural historians and planners interested in history.

The process of cooperation between different fields seems to be smoother if not encumbered by a well-established tradition of historiography. For example, the urban historian working on the physical form of Renaissance cities builds upon the accumulated scholarship of several centuries and can break through the set norms only with difficulty. The problem of territoriality, as pointed out by D. Crouch and W. MacDonald in reference to the general practice of archaeology, can further obstruct research. In contrast, the historian analyzing a relatively "newer" and "unconventional" topic, such as a West African urban settlement, can more readily incorporate a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology and ethnography.

Several other approaches and techniques have yet to be explored by urban historians. For example, although computers are now being employed to help quantify economic data and collate data bases, little experimentation has been done with visual analyses, such as the modelling of historical urban spaces. In this respect, architectural history has been more experimental in incorporating new techniques than urban history.

In the 1980s, the debate over urban history still rages. No one discipline has ended the search for a clear self definition, or for acceptable methods to deal with other academic approaches. In spite of intense searching and experimentation, a truly integrated exchange has yet not happened. Nevertheless, the quest has had positive repercussions in several areas. Interdisciplinary experimentation has stimulated the call for new methods within each discipline. In addition, researchers in fields not traditionally related to urban history, such as English, have been attracted by the animated discussion on urban history and themselves entered the fray. The interand intra-disciplinary trends evident here point toward a further broadening of perspectives in future work. Discussion of the issues of content, theory, and methodology is crucial, especially in this still formative stage of our discipline. We believe that this updated examination from the architectural historian's angle will stimulate further dialogue, help focus the debate, and hasten the formulation of a true interdisciplinary exchange.

Notes
1 For a review of recent literature, see Kostof, Spiro "Crisis and Turf," Design Book Review Vol. 10 (Fall 1986) pp. 35-39
2 In 1971, urban historians at a conference at Madison, Wisconsin, tried unsuccessfully to develop a comprehensive definition for "the new urban history." A few years later, Stephan Thernstrom, a leading proponent of the neo-

logion, announced that he had "given up on the term;" in "A Conversation with Stephan Thernstrom," by Stave, M. in the Journal of Urban History Vol. 1, No. 2 (February 1975) p. 198. For a recent critique of new social history, see Himmelweit, Gertrude The New History and the Old Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA) 1987. Among Himmelweit's many quarrels with the new social history is the fragmentation of the field into innumerable specializations among them urban history.
4 Zunz, Oliver "Introduction," Reliving the Past University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill and London) 1985, p. 3
7 Kostof, op. cit., p. 37
8 This broadening is in accordance with Fernand Braudel's earlier discussions on "History of the Crossroads." Braudel argued that there should be a strong dialogue between history and different social sciences, namely, geography, demography, sociology, economics, and statistics. Only through such a commitment, he believed, could history be of "any substantial use in understanding the world today." See Braudel, Fernand On History (Sarah Matthews, trans.) University of Chicago Press (Chicago) 1980, pp. 200-207
9 See, for example, The Pursuit of Urban History (Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe, eds.) E. Arnold (London) 1983. This group discussion explores the social, anthropological, and economic aspects of urban history.
11 The works of Jan de Vries provide a model for this approach; see European Urbanization, 1500-1800 Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA) 1984.
12 McClung, William A. The Architecture of Paradise University of California Press (Berkeley) 1983
13 Among the best sources for recent research in these areas are specialized journals such as Geographical Review and Urban Anthropology.


A similar trend in popularizing urban history is observed in films. For example, in America by Design (1987), Spiro Kostof interweaves social and architectural issues in discussions about the street, the workplace, the home, and the shape of land.


Boatwright, Mary T. Hadrian and the City of Rome Princeton University Press (Princeton) 1987; Diane Favro is currently completing a book on Augustan Rome.

This parallels Hobsbawm’s view of urban history as a paradigm of social changes, mentioned above.

Zunz, op. cit., “Introduction,” p. 4