

Call for Papers

Urban Accelerations

The “European City” in a booming continent (1950–1970)

International Conference, Strasbourg / October 2025

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This international conference is jointly organized by ENSA Nancy and ENSA Strasbourg.

“The experience of modernization is an experience of acceleration.”
Harmut Rosa, *Accélération. Une critique sociale du temps*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010 (p. 36)

Let us fill you in on the #1 task awaiting your elected officials. It’s explosive, unprecedented in history: urban expansion following the “baby boom.” Explosive, indeed. Rouen must double in size. Timeline? 25 years. And there’s no stopping it.

“Rouen va doubler en 25 ans” (Rouen will double in 25 years), *Paris Normandie*, March 3, 1965
(Translated citation)

The decades of urban growth between 1950 and 1970 were decisive in the history of urbanization on the European continent. “The second half of the 20th century crowned a European urban journey that went back more than two millennia. [...] Suddenly, time accelerated and space dwindled.”¹ Within a particularly narrow time frame, cities were forced to cope with the impact of exceptional economic growth, alongside technical and social developments that radically transformed spatial practices. Past urban morphology was replaced by massive, industrialized building production, and many neighborhoods deemed unsanitary were demolished to make way for new construction. Amidst emerging environmental concerns, urban sprawl managed to blur the urban-rural divide, often redefining the boundaries and scale of cities. While European urbanization has represented a challenge since the 19th century, the years following World War II unanimously stand out, due to the unprecedented acceleration of urban and social transformation.

¹ Guy Burgel, « La ville contemporaine de la Seconde Guerre mondiale à nos jours », dans Jean-Luc Pinol (dir.), *Histoire de l’Europe urbaine II. De l’Ancien régime à nos jours*, Paris, Seuil, 2003, p. 555.

Why look back on this period again? Indeed, a vast bibliography already exists, underlining governments' responses to this urgency through centralized policies such as reconstruction, new towns and *grands ensembles*,² along with the international development of urban planning.³ However, this conference seeks to examine urban transformations from a local perspective, placing the investigation within urban societies, which paradoxically have seldom been the topic of historical urban studies focused on this period. Urban societies were central in research on the emerging “transnational municipal moment”⁴ of the 19th century, driven by the political, economic and intellectual elites of cities in the old continent—whose influence, particularly on other continents, has been demonstrated by transnational history. However, compared to the very active “*toile municipale*” of the 1870s-1930s⁵ and the rise of European cities during globalization from the 1980s⁶ onwards, postwar European urban societies are relatively overshadowed by the importance of States in urban planning, despite the rapid and profound transformations they were undergoing. How did these urban societies experience this great “acceleration”? The aim is to bypass superficial country-specific overviews in order to grasp the social, political and cultural realities of various local forms of modernization.

Yet can a multitude of local experiences be coherent? This conference additionally seeks to explore the disputed⁷ concept of the “European city” by investigating its validity throughout the postwar period. Following current research trends, the aim is to contribute to reinterpreting European urban and architectural history in the context of global change.⁸ Europe is by no means a homogenous entity: the Cold War politically divided the West and East (a hiatus that continues to shape historiographic knowledge); and the North and South are fragmented in terms of

² For French and British cases, see Kenny Cupers, *La banlieue, un projet social. Ambitions d'une politique urbaine, 1945-1975*, Marseille, Parenthèses, 2018; Danièle Voldman, *La Reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954. Histoire d'une politique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997; Loïc Vadelorge, *Retour sur les villes nouvelles. Une histoire urbaine du XX^e siècle*, Paris, Créaphis, 2013; Gwenaëlle Le Goullon, *Les Grands ensembles en France. Genèse d'une politique publique. 1945-1962*, Paris, CTHS, 2008; for British cases, see Stephen V. Ward, *Planning and Urban Change*, London, Paul Chapman, 1996; *The Peaceful Path: Building Garden Cities and New Towns*, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2016; Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Postwar England*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998.

³ Carola Hein (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, New York, Routledge, 2017.

⁴ Pierre-Yves Saunier, Shane Ewen (dir.), *Another Global City. Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment (1850-2000)*, Basingstoke, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Renaud Payre, *Une science communale. Réseaux réformateurs et municipalité providence* Paris, CNRS Editions, 2007.

⁵ Pierre-Yves Saunier, “La toile municipale aux XIX^e-XX^e siècles: un panorama transnational”, *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, vol. 34, n. 2, 2006, p. 43-56.

⁶ Patrick Le Galès, *Le retour des villes européennes. Sociétés urbaines, mondialisation, gouvernement et gouvernance*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

⁷ Harmut Kaelble, “La ville européenne au XX^e siècle”, *Revue économique*, vol. 51, n. 2, 2000, p. 385-400.

⁸ “L'histoire européenne après le tournant global”, issue coordinated by David Montadel, *Les Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 76, n. 4, 2021, p. 667.

political regime (Portugal, Spain, Greece), economies and urban planning practices.⁹ However, the lens can be inverted by placing the continent (broadly defined) within the context of internationalization and, perhaps, “globalization.” The swift rise of media in the 1950s-1960s led to heightened awareness surrounding urbanization in America, Asia and elsewhere. With this in mind, to what extent was the very idea of the “European city” (whose definition is not predetermined herein) revitalized and how was it used to plan cities? By focusing on the scale of European cities—understood as having a continent-specific pattern defined by a dense network of medium-sized cities (200,000 to 1 or 2 million inhabitants), with strong social differentiation and political regulation—is it possible to identify a specific continental trajectory in defining contemporary urbanity within an accelerating process of global urbanization? Apart from the obvious effects of rupture, what are potential continuities, local legacies and adaptations in terms of urban planning and heritage management?

This conference aims to understand modernization from the late 1940s to the 1980s by revisiting the notion of the European city as it relates to “accelerations” of the time. The European city is considered as a specific territory of tensions, and not simply a reduced version of the world's major urban areas. Through perceptions of “acceleration,” the three main investigative themes examine ways of conceiving, governing, planning, building and challenging the city, in which historical uses, design practices and forecasting future urban realities are intersected:

Spatial acceleration

Seminal works in architectural history¹⁰ have shaped post-1940s European urban modernization narratives, focusing on operations or achievements signed by renowned architects, and on spatial transformation in the urban periphery. Few studies, however, have attempted to examine these transformations as they relate to the historic city center, or its renewal in relation to urban growth. What references do actors use, and what links do they forge with local history and geography? Are we witnessing increasing heterogeneity of forms and practices in cities, or rather a

⁹ Eszter Gantner, Heidi Hein-Kricher, Oliver Hochadel, *Interurban Knowledge Exchange in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870-1950*, New York, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁰ Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1966; Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1980; William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1982.

homogenization? Are cities being increasingly nuclearized? Here, the challenges of land management and the shift from combatting insalubrity towards appreciating the qualities of old buildings can be examined. The aim is to question formal and spatial design using a multiscale approach, linking urban and architectural challenges.

Political acceleration

Compared to the United States,¹¹ Europe has witnessed an increasing role of government in urban planning. Moreover, international players have gained power in the urban arena, through the creation of the EU and the emergence of international organizations (UN-Habitat, OECD) that deal with urban and heritage matters. How have local elites (political, economic or cultural) reshaped their decision-making spaces? How are national urban planning and heritage protection directives adopted, debated or amended? How does investment by powerful figures continue to play a role in shaping the city from a local perspective? In France, recent studies have focused on metropolitan areas such as Lyon,¹² Metz¹³ and Fos-Marseille.¹⁴ Based on these in-depth monographic studies and national reports, is it possible to develop a European interpretation that goes beyond the East/West divide imposed by the Cold War, fostering a history that transcends conventional narratives?¹⁵

Social acceleration

Over the last fifteen years, English and German historiographies have emphasized the importance of local urban societies and their mobilizing and innovative capacities.¹⁶ Further, ongoing programs have been locally examining the ways in which urban societies shape narratives of modernization or “urban crisis” by positioning themselves for/against a national or international

¹¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1998.

¹² Marie-Clotilde Meillerand, *Penser l'aménagement d'une métropole au 20^{ème} siècle. Enjeux territoriaux, acteurs locaux et politique publique dans la région lyonnaise*, doctoral dissertation in history, completed under the supervision of Jean-Luc Pinol and defended in 2010.

¹³ Pierre Maurer, *Architectures et aménagement urbain à Metz (1947-1970). Action municipale: la modernisation d'une ville*, doctoral dissertation in history, completed under the supervision of Hélène Vacher and Anne-Marie Chatelet, defended in 2018.

¹⁴ Xavier Daumalin, Gilbert Buti, Fabien Bartolotti, Olivier Raveux (Dir.). *L'histoire portuaire marseillaise en chantier. Espaces, fonctions et représentations, XVII^e-XX^e siècle*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2022.

¹⁵ Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu et Christophe Bonneuil (dir.), *Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses". Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

¹⁶ Jorn Duwel, Niels Gutschow (dir.), *A Blessing in Disguise. War and Town Planning in Europe (1940-1945)*, Berlin DOM Publishers, 2013; John Pendlebury, Erdem Erten, Larkham Peter, *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction*, New York, Routledge, 2015; Martin Baumeister, Bruno Bonomo, Dieter Schott (dir.), *Cities Contested. Urban Politics, Heritage, and Social Movements in Italy and West Germany in the 1970s*, Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2017.

context.¹⁷ The aim here is to situate (local) urban societies as specific territories of tensions, within their own (increasingly global)¹⁸ era, characterized by an upheaval of social structures (development of the middle class, increased mobility, new immigration); changes in political structures (rise of state power, creation of the European Union, surge in international policies); and an exceptional expansion of perspectives calling into question the “European” character of European cities (particularly the discovery of American urban development, the spread of an “international style,” comparisons with “Third World” urbanization, the rise of environmental issues).¹⁹ The aim is to see how a specifically European approach to urban modernization can be assessed.

Contributions in English or French may derive from various disciplines and should be part of a historical approach based on urban history or architectural history. Interdisciplinary or comparative approaches are welcome, as are thematic monographic entries, especially those emphasizing local and previously unpublished sources.

Proposals should be sent in .pdf format no later than December 12, 2024, to accelerations@nancy.archi.fr and should include a one-page summary of research arguments, accompanied by sources, a brief bibliography, as well as a one-page CV.

Calendar:

- **December 12, 2024:** proposal submissions
- **January–February 2025:** selection of speakers
- **March–April 2025:** program development and diffusion
- **September 1, 2025:** paper submissions
- **October 2025:** conference

¹⁷ Marlon Barbehön, Sybille Münch, “Interrogating the city: Comparing locally distinct crisis discourses”, *Urban Studies*, vol. 54, n. 9, 2017, p. 2072-2086; Marlon Barbehön, Sybille Münch, “The ‘distinctiveness of cities’ and distinctions in cities: boundaries of belonging in comparative perspective”, *Urban Research & Practice*, vol. 9, 2016, p. 3755.

¹⁸ Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, Daniel J. Sargent (eds), *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective*, Cambridge (Ma.), Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2010.

¹⁹ Tims Soens, Dieter Schott, Michael Toyka-Seid, Bert de Munck (eds), *Urbanizing Nature. Actors and Agency (Dis)connecting Cities and Nature since 1500*, New York, Routledge, 2019; François Jarrige, Thomas Leroux, *La contamination du monde. Une histoire des pollutions à l'âge industriel*, Paris, Seuil, 2017; Stéphane Frioux (dir.), *Une France en transition? Urbanisation, risques environnementaux et horizon écologique dans le second XX^e siècle*, Ceyzérieu, Champs Vallon, 2021.

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