

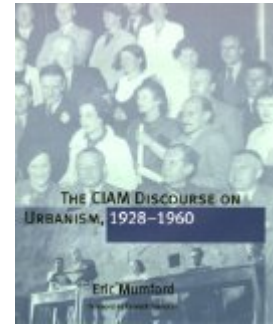
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eric Mumford. *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000. 375 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13364-7.

Reviewed by Gail Sansbury (Department of Urban and Regional Planning, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona)

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In the whirl of responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, in particular the destruction of the World Trade Towers, the future of high-rise buildings and modernist planning schemes have been the subject of public forums, museum exhibitions, and postings on this list. Eric Mumford's organizational history of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and the "urbanistic discourse" produced by its members is a useful text for those scholars and students thinking critically about these matters, in particular, the tendency to portray CIAM as a unitary voice, a straw figure easily destroyed in debates about the influence of the Modern Movement in architecture. As proposals for re-building downtown New York City are put forward (and one hopes there will be similar efforts for Kabul) a careful look at the history of CIAM reminds us of just what the stakes were—the social transformation of the city through architecture, urban design and planning in the decades just before and after World War II.

Mumford shows that consensus within CIAM was not easily achieved and it was almost impossible in the postwar years. For many, especially architectural historians, this will be a familiar story, but by focusing on the organization rather than the most famous participants, Mumford's narrative follows the shifting aesthetic and political debates over this thirty-two year period. For non-architects, the book is especially valuable because for many, CIAM is a vague construct, an organization somehow connected with the architect and urbanist Le Corbusier and the art historian Sigfried Giedion and a romantic shipboard meeting in the 1930s that resulted in the Charter of Athens. This isn't necessarily wrong, but in the course of his story of the origins of CIAM, its development, and its dissolution, Mumford provides a context

for understanding the positions of individual members.

Because of their leadership roles, the writings and speeches of Le Corbusier and Giedion do play a central role, but lest you think of CIAM as simply "Corb's world," as Gropius described CIAM to a student in 1950 (p. 204), Mumford takes special care to shed light on the multiple viewpoints and voices in CIAM, especially in the 1930s. He has combined his analysis of myriad documents related to CIAM (CIAM publications, meeting minutes, contemporary journalism, and the private correspondence and papers of CIAM members) to reconstruct the major debates about architecture and urbanism at eleven Congresses held between 1928 and 1959. In between the formal Congresses, a series of planning meetings of the CIAM leadership (CIRPAC, Comité International pour la Réalisation des Problèmes d'architecture Contemporaine; later, CIAM Council), took place.

Altogether, there are 43 meetings covered in the book. An appendix provides a helpful chronology, as the many venues as well as arguments tend to blur together, threatening at times to obscure Mumford's own narrative. Indeed, this rich account of debates over politics and art, social theories and practical action, and design innovation and production techniques, leaves the reader quite exhausted—as if one had actually sat through every session of every meeting. This is partly the result of Mumford's refusal simply to tell a story about Le Corbusier, Giedion, Gropius, and other members of the leadership of CIAM. Despite his rich sources, however, he notes that "submerged conflicts within the group...remain difficult to document" (p. 182). Nevertheless, his effort to portray this conflict is what makes reading through endless meetings, manifestos, and proclamations worthwhile. For ex-

ample, Mumford shows us how Giedion edited his exchange with the Polish architect Helena Syrkus on art and the “common man” at the 1949 congress in Bergamo. (The presentation by Syrkus is included in Joan Ockman’s anthology (1993), as are other documents from post-war CIAM; this collection is a useful companion to Mumford’s third and fourth chapters.) We are drawn into this debate about formalism and social realism not just because of ideological and political issues, but because we’ve been able to follow Syrkus’s participation as a member and leader of CIAM, along with her husband Szymon, from 1928 forward. The Syrkus’s wartime experiences, like those of other CIAM members, help us understand the historical context for the Bergamo debate and its importance to all participants.

The book is organized chronologically, and the first chapter covers the first three congresses: CIAM 1 in La Sarraz in 1928, followed by CIAM 2 in Frankfurt in 1929, which focused on the Existenzminimum, and CIAM 3, held in Brussels in 1930, with the theme of rational lot development. In the second chapter, “The Functional City, 1931-39,” Mumford analyzes the debates over various methods for developing scientific approaches to case studies and the presentation of urban plans. Mumford shows how members of CIAM drew upon previous work on urban form, such as the group’s outline for the four functions of the city: dwelling, work, transportation, and recreation.

CIAM 4 was originally planned for Moscow, but later held aboard the SS *Patris II* in the Aegean Sea in the summer of 1933, making it one of the most famous of all CIAM congresses. CIAM 5, held in Paris in 1937, focused on housing and recreation. The agendas and debates of these conferences are examined in light of later publications, such as “CIAM: La Charte D’Athenes” which Le Corbusier published in 1938, although no consensus had been reached during the earlier congresses. This chapter also contains the stories of attempts to “transplant” CIAM in the late thirties via local organizations or branches in England, the United States, and other nations.

The war and postwar years are covered in Chapter 3, including a detailed analysis of Jose Luis Sert’s *Can Our Cities Survive?*; the formation of a New York Chapter devoted to postwar planning; Le Corbusier and the French CIAM group, ASCORAL; J.M. Richards and the “new empiricists” in England; and finally, the 1947 CIAM 6 held in Bridgwater, England, the first postwar Congress, and CIAM 7, held two years later in Bergamo, Italy. The meeting in Bridgwater was the first to include

a new generation of architects, including many British students; their presence, as well as debates over the positions of Sert (he became president in 1947), Le Corbusier, and Richards were evidence of the challenges to come. Although a seven-point resolution was issued at the end of the Bergamo congress, some delegates charged that CIAM was “losing its working character” (p. 196), just one reflection of the increasing conflicts.

The fourth and last substantive chapter covers the attempts of CIAM leadership and members to reach some consensus about its direction during the 1950s. CIAM 8 was held in Hoddesdon, England, in 1951, with the theme of the “heart of the city.” This focus on urban public space addressed an aspect that early critics of CIAM such as Lewis Mumford had found missing in the “functional city,” and it marked a shift away from CIAM’s emphasis on social housing. But this period was also important because a new generation of both leaders and delegates began a debate over the definitions of “urbanisme” and “habitat.” By CIAM 9, held in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, a growing split led by Alison and Peter Smithson and Team 10 led to critiques and counter-critiques of CIAM and its purpose. These continued to dominate at a series of smaller meetings and by the time of CIAM 10, held in Dubrovnik in 1956, most discussion centered around the reading of a letter from Le Corbusier to the delegates, his kind of “hand-off” declaration to the younger generation. CIAM ’59, in Otterlo, was effectively the last meeting of CIAM as a formal organization.

In the concluding chapter, the move from the detailed examination of the discourse of these forty-three meetings and their associated documents to a brief assessment of the “influence” of CIAM is less satisfying. The most important lesson from Mumford’s research is that there were multiple and contentious voices within CIAM on every issue associated with urbanist theory and practice; that it was not just “Corb’s world;” and further, that these voices shifted over time, reflecting the social and political context as well as generational dynamics. CIAM cannot be portrayed as a unitary force that can be held responsible, for good and bad, for architecture, urban design, and planning in the twentieth century. See for example, Mumford’s discussion of James Holston’s book on Brasilia (Holston 1989). But as a planning educator, I would have liked more than just a sentence on the similarities and differences of CIAM and the Congress for New Urbanism. I was also surprised not to see some reference to Mumford’s own work on the non-CIAM precedents for the “tower in the park” as built in the United States (Mumford 1995).

Perhaps it is not fair to ask more from this richly documented text, because it will serve as an important catalyst for future research. Indeed, as Mumford writes, the influence of CIAM is hard to sort out. For example, although Mumford focused on the discourse produced by the leadership of CIAM, one need not have been an attendee at one of the major meetings or planning meetings to have been engaged by the ideas and design strategies put forward by those Mumford identifies as the CIAM avant garde. In his conclusion, Mumford states that a number of housing developments in the United States were built following federal government standards and therefore had no direct involvement of CIAM members. But is this how we should understand CIAM's influence? For example, the African American architect Hilyard Robinson spent 1931-32 studying in Berlin. There is no record in Mumford's text that he attended any CIAM meetings, but even if he did not attend the Berlin "Special Congress" in June of that year, he would undoubtedly have heard about it. It is also likely that he saw the traveling exhibit on existenzminimum. Robinson's papers indicated that he traveled throughout Europe and was especially interested in the new housing by the Dutch and the Germans. On early resumes, he listed his membership in the International Housing Association of Frankfurt. Robinson returned to Washington, D.C. and the Howard University architecture department, and then went on to design the first public housing for African Americans in Washington, DC, Langston Terrace Dwellings (1937, Robinson, Porter and Williams, for the PWA), among many other housing developments. In this same period, he corresponded with Alfred Kast-

ner and Oscar Stonorov whose Carl Mackley houses appeared in Sert's publication, reproduced in Mumford's text.

I have no doubt that if Mumford had found any mention of Robinson, it would have been in one of the many lists of attendees or in a carefully posed group photo. Mumford is careful to include all the names he comes across in the archives, and in many cases, he provides brief biographical sketches, but he explicitly leaves the "local" story of CIAM members to future researchers. Robinson didn't appear to be a member, but rather someone once removed—is this where the story of CIAM becomes the story of the "Modern Movement"? Mumford's book suggests many new projects for researchers—surely someone will write an in-depth study of Helena Syrkus, just as scholars are now doing for Hilyard Robinson. For them and others, Eric Mumford's history of CIAM will provide an important framework and guide.

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