



Flammable Cities: Fire, Urban Environment, and Culture in History. Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, Washington, DC; Greg Bankoff, University of Hull; Uwe Luebken, GHI; Jordan Sand, Georgetown University, 15.05.2008-17.05.2008.

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Flammable Cities: Fire, Urban Environment, and Culture in History

Preindustrial cities around the world burned frequently. Yet many prospered, and some grew to populations of over a million inhabitants. Although new building and extinguishing technologies and the rise of fire insurance fundamentally altered the relationship between cities and fire beginning in the seventeenth century, many cities around the world remained largely wood-built into the twentieth century. Some still are.

In May 2008, an international gathering of scholars was held at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, to examine the history of uncontrolled fire in large urban settlements. No work to date has taken a global approach to this issue. Research on fire in preindustrial and industrial cities has tended to be limited to treatment in the context of individual urban histories (either of particular great fires or of the growth of firefighting technology) or general treatment of overall trends. The English-language historiography on urban fire history overwhelmingly has treated only Europe and the United States. The conference departed from these narrow methodological and geographical limits in order to illuminate a host of new issues related to cities and the environment by permitting comparison of differing urban morphologies, types of building material, social systems, cultural attitudes, and methods for coping with disaster. Since the study of cities is inherently a multidisciplinary enterprise, the gathering included scholars in fields ranging from art history to geography, in addition to social, cultural and environmental historians.

Three papers dealt with fire in the Luso-Hispanic world. MARK MOLESKY reminded us that the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, often heralded as the “first modern disaster,” was actually a complex emergency. It was not simply a seismic event of great magnitude followed by a tsunami but also a devastating fire that raged for perhaps a week and consumed a large part of the old city. Using eyewitness accounts, Molesky was able to reconstruct the course of this conflagration from the controversies over its inception to the limited abilities of the city’s fire-fighting services to extinguish or even control the blaze, to estimates of the extent of the damages wrought. He concluded that it was the fire more than anything else that proved to be so destructive of property and that perhaps as many as 10,000 people may have perished in the flames, a truly staggering figure both for the period and for the type of hazard. In fact, it was the sheer scale of this destruction that provided Enlightenment officials with a unique opportunity to reconstruct and “improve” the centre of Lisbon in a form that it largely retains to this day.

In SAMUEL MARTLAND’s presentation, the history of fire in Valparaíso was about enterprise and innovation. The city pioneered new firefighting and fire prevention measures in Chile: establishing volunteer firefighting companies from among the social elite; readily adopting private insurance as a means of limiting loss; and elaborating building codes and safety regulations to prevent future conflagrations. In this, the municipal authorities were evidently successful, as the city experienced

no major blaze between the great downtown fire of 1858 and the earthquake of 1906. Paraphrasing a newspaper article of the period, Martland showed how fire had been transformed from a catastrophe to a matter of business.

KRISTEN MCCLEARY had a very different take on fire. Apparently, fear of fire and concern with fire safety in public theatres became an almost obsessive focus of city administrators in late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires. Public theatres along with churches and department stores were the foremost covered spaces of the time where large crowds regularly congregated and so posed exceptional fire risks. According to McCleary, this fixation with fire safety had its roots in the local elite's attempts to both outperform their counterparts in Europe and North America and to impose a measure of discipline upon the disorderly migrant population who were entering the country in such large numbers at the turn of the twentieth century. In McCleary's analysis, fire constituted a useful and fruitful lens through which to view the modernisation of the city.

Bridging the divide between the Luso-Hispanic world and that of Southeast Asia, GREG BANKOFF examined fire in the nineteenth century Philippines. He presented the European city outside of Europe as having had a dual nature, a European core at its centre about which formed a much larger indigenous periphery. Manila, therefore, was really two cities within a city, representing not only the socio-economic and ethnic realities of colonial life but also a particular cultural adaptation to the twin hazards of earthquake and fire that, over time, had come to dominate notions of urban planning.

Two other papers at the conference also studied fire in Southeast Asia but in more contemporary times. It is the political nature of fire that came through so strongly with these authors. NANCY HAEKYUNG KWAK showed how the government of Singapore used the Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961, a conflagration that reduced some 60 acres of overcrowded slums to ashes in a matter of hours, to initiate a program of slum clearance, social engineering and, ultimately, nation-building. Rehousing those affected by the blaze paved the way for the massive public/private housing programs that so characterise Singapore today. Kwak interpreted the Bukit Ho Swee fire as the crucible from which emerged the modern city state and the continuing popularity of its ruling party.

JÃRME TADIÃ examined the relationship between fire and governance in Jakarta since the 1970s. Focusing on fires in certain slums of Jakarta, TadiÃ revealed

the web of interests and actors involved in the provision of aid and succour to those directly affected by it and in the subsequent reconstruction of an area. In particular, political parties in *reformasi* Indonesia have used fire, both arson and the distribution of relief, as a means of extending patronage and expanding their power base. Fire in contemporary Jakarta is thus not just a hazard but a prism through which modernity, power and the daily constraints of living are refracted, revealing how the metropolis functions over time.

In early modern Europe, prevention of large blazes engendered more municipal regulation than almost any other problem of urban habitation. HRVOJE PETRIÃ presented detailed portraits of fire incidents in four key cities of the Croato-Slavonian Kingdom. Regular firefighting forces did not appear until the creation of voluntary societies in the nineteenth century. Municipal authorities sought with some success to limit fire damage by requiring citizens to equip themselves and be ready to fight fires. The most important development came, however, following the fire that destroyed the military stronghold of VaraÅdin in 1776. After this fire, all reconstruction within the city walls was required to be in brick. VaraÅdin re-emerged as a nascent bourgeois city, since the aristocrats who had made it their capital prior to 1776 decamped for Zagreb. Thus in this instance the transition to fireproof construction accompanied a sharp break in the social composition and political role of the city.

A key development in the modernization of firefighting in Europe came in 17th-century Amsterdam: the invention of the fire engine and fire hose. Art historian SUSAN KURETSKY revealed the importance of the cultural context for this technological innovation by examining the ways in which fire and firefighting were represented in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch art. Kuretsky focused in particular on the work of Jan van der Heyden (1637-1712), who patented the snakepump, one of the first fire engines with a flexible hose that could be drawn into buildings to focus a stream of water directly on the seat of the fire indoors. This was especially suited to early modern European cities such as Amsterdam, with a high density of multi-story flammable buildings, where a single spark could trigger a city-wide disaster.

Like Amsterdam, premodern Hamburg was highly vulnerable to large-scale conflagration, as DIRK SCHUBERT explained in his paper on the city's 1842 fire. Igniting for unknown reasons in the Deichstrasse, the fire quickly spread to other parts of the town. Fueled by

mostly timber-framed houses and aided by the weather conditions, as well as an inadequate firefighting organization, the catastrophe destroyed 2,000 buildings with more than 4,000 housing units. About 20,000 citizens lost their homes and had to relocate to tent villages on the town's periphery. Despite the widespread destruction, or rather because of it, many merchants and other influential citizens saw the fire as a welcome tool for transforming Hamburg from a pre-modern fortress city into a modern metropolis.

Montreal witnessed similar creative destruction after four large fires between 1850 and 1852 had destroyed almost one-fifth of the city's housing stock. Here, too, fire proved to be a powerful agent of urban morphological change, as JASON GILLILAND pointed out. Fires could reconcile the inertia of the built environment with the constant push to remodel the physical urban space according to the needs of a growing city in a capitalist economy. The pace of changes in Montreal's urban fabric after the catastrophe, however, was not the same in all affected areas and at all times. Analyzing three different areas of the city, Gilliland was able to show that Montreal's productive core was rebuilt much more quickly than peripheral quarters. Also, redevelopment was more intense in boom periods than during phases of economic distress and was more likely to involve morphological changes such as increased building height or improvements in infrastructure. Since fire could be such a useful tool, it is hardly surprising that many urban fires were intentionally set.

This is exactly what happened in post-war Cleveland, as DANIEL KERR elaborated in his paper. During the riots of the 1960s, African Americans resorted to fire to protest police brutality and drive white businesses out of predominantly black neighborhoods to gain more economic control over these areas. But the strategy of abandoning and willingly destroying urban housing units, employed by (overwhelmingly white) landlords in the 1970s, proved to be much more devastating in the end than the riots. Fires turned out to be especially useful in transforming urban space for profitable future use. Kerr showed that in Cleveland, the city government itself eventually embraced fire as an instrument of urban renewal, abandoning inner city residents and encouraging demolition contractors and property owners to burn buildings. The lasting effects of this strategy were devastating. The city lost a huge part of its housing stock, and gentrified Renaissance Villages supplanted former black working-class neighborhoods.

AMY S. GREENBERG addressed approaches to fire risk by comparing late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century firefighting strategies in Mexico to those in the U.S. and Canada. Taking the fire histories of Mexico City, Mérida, and Monterey as case studies, Greenberg noted striking differences rather than similarities in the developments north and south of the Rio Grande. While urban modernization was a key element in President Porfirio Díaz's vision of progress, firefighting was not a central part of it, to say the least. Only Mexico City witnessed the creation of a professional firefighting force during the Porfiriato. All other cities still had to rely on volunteer firefighters. One reason for this neglect certainly was the fact that most houses were built of stone and adobe. Greenberg stated, however, that differences in building materials could not sufficiently explain the history of Mérida and Monterey, two cities which were devastated by fire. Rather, the absence of strong and effective municipal government, the lack of local water sources, and city dwellers' fatalistic attitude regarding disasters were responsible for Mexico's different trajectory.

SARA WERMIEL pointed out that in the United States, the relationship between fire insurance companies and the management of urban fire risk was not one of straightforward risk reduction. She stated that insurance companies even discouraged fireproof construction, since fires were essential to their business. This was especially true for the stock fire insurance companies. Since their agents were unable to inspect every insured property, the hazard-rating systems they developed had only a few classes and modelled the real risk only in a very rough manner. As a result, everybody paid more or less the same premium, which rewarded hazardous buildings and penalized safe structures. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the public grew increasingly discontent with their indiscriminate rates, new and hostile legislation was enacted, and, most importantly, mutual fire insurance companies appeared on the scene. The Factory Mutuals, in particular, offered an alternative to the rigorous systems of its competitors. By focusing on first-class risks, inspecting properties on a regular basis, and sponsoring research on the flammability of certain building materials, they were able to offer lower rates and, thus, force the stock companies to alter their rate-setting practices.

In her paper on the social impact of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, ANDREA DAVIES HENDERSON showed that catastrophes are anything but a social equalizer, even if homes of the rich and poor, the

native-born and immigrant, were affected by the blaze. Crucial firefighting decisions as well as relief policies followed pre-disaster patterns of stratification by ethnicity, race, and class. Firefighters, for example, deliberately saved homes of the wealthy, while Chinatown was left to burn; servants in the Western Addition watched the houses of affluent families, allowing them to leave the city; and Chinatown was supposed to be relocated after the disaster—a plan that Chinatown residents successfully countered by immediate non-permit rebuilding. Thus, the fires, as Henderson emphasized, acted as an accelerant to social differences—in turn-of-the-century San Francisco.

AYODEJI OLUKOJU's paper on Lagos highlighted the political contexts and meanings of fire in a contemporary megacity with a burgeoning population living in fragile and combustible shantytowns. Olukaju considered three types of fire outbreak: fires that began in shantytown dwellings, fires in markets, and fires in high-rise strategic buildings. Frequent shantytown fires resulted partly from infrastructural problems, such as the government's failure to provide adequate electricity, which caused residents to use hazardous petrol-burning generators. Marketplace fires occurred because combustible materials were often stored on site and because many workers also lived in the markets. Arson was widely suspected in the case of fires in high-rise public buildings, where suspicious fires often occurred under the military government of the 1980s and 1990s whenever an office being investigated for corruption.

In her presentation on the history of urban fires in late imperial Russia, KATHY FRIERSON proposed the use of fireproof construction itself as a defining feature of Russian imperial urbanism. From the time of Ivan III (late 15th century), a pattern emerged of building stone fortresses with administrative functions and churches within the walls and wood buildings without. When Peter the Great built St. Petersburg, masons were forbidden to work anywhere else. From this time forward, the earlier pattern of a masonry citadel with a wooden residential quarter was effectively writ large onto the landscape of the empire as a whole, with the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg built increasingly in fireproof materials and well guarded against conflagration while the rest of Russia constituted the flammable town.

In contrast to Peter the Great, the Tokugawa shoguns, who governed Japan between 1600 and 1868, ruled a capital city where large conflagrations were endemic. JORDAN SAND's presentation argued that uncontrolled fire

was in fact an integral part of Edo's social structure and the Tokugawa system of governance. Examining official responses to arson, Sand found that although the letter of the law was extraordinarily harsh, in actual practice there was considerable leniency. Courts placed greater emphasis on the moral character of the defendant than on the damage caused by the crime. This is in keeping with a system in which the government invested little in either the protection of private property or in architectural grandeur and permanence. Firefighters took a controlled burn approach, clearing a path for the conflagration to burn unimpeded downwind until it reached water or open fields.

SHANE EWEN's examination of the growth of municipal brigades in Britain added further facets to the picture of modern fire regimes. Edinburgh played a critical role in this development. Ewen shows that the municipalization of firefighting was tied to the rise of technocracy generally. This was related to a range of other concerns beside fire, including in particular public health, which provided the incentive for introducing pressurized water. At the same time, rather than describing this transformation as a gradual and steady social process, Ewen demonstrated the importance of the catastrophic event and the charismatic individual—in this instance the Great Fire of 1824 in Edinburgh and James Braidwood, the city's captain of engines at the time, whose heroics and success established his disciplined and technologically sophisticated approach to firefighting as the model throughout Britain.

If firefighters were a new kind of hero in the growth of modern technocratic urbanism, in the context of late-20th century urban warfare, they could represent precisely the forces of order and spatial hegemony that militias sought to undermine. This was the case in Beirut in the mid-1970s, according to the presentation of SOFIA SHWAYRI. Firefighters were targeted by both sides in the battle to control the suqs (narrow, covered shopping streets) of central Beirut. The labyrinthine form of the urban fabric in these districts made firefighting difficult. It also made it difficult for the warring parties to control large continuous territories, so arson and explosives were used to homogenize the space. By the late 1980s, central Beirut was a no-man's land. Shwayri described the resurrection of the suqs that followed, this time on a pattern seen in cities around the world, as a shopping mall for the global rich bearing the architectural trappings of local tradition. Ironically, it was in this context that Beirut for the first time instituted a building code with specific reference to fire safety.

Altogether, the contrasts between findings in different cities revealed that fires can have profoundly different meanings depending on context. The conference made clear not only the many ways in which urban fire has been survived and managed throughout history but the many ways in which it has also been positively useful.

Conference Overview

I: Fire and the Early Modern City

Chair: Maren Lorenz (GHI)

Mark C. Molesky (Seton Hall University): The Great Fire of Lisbon, 1755

Hrvoje Petrić (University of Zagreb): Fire and the Urban Environment in Early Modern Cities and Towns of the Croato-Slavonian Kingdom

II: Fire, Fear and the Urban Imagination

Chair: Jordan Sand (Georgetown University)

Susan Donahue Kuretsky (Vassar College): The Art of Fighting Fire: Jan van der Heyden, 1637-1712

Kristen McCleary (James Madison University): Inflaming the Fears of Theater-Goers: How Fires Shaped the Public Sphere in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1880 to 1910

III: Fire and Urban Morphology

Chair: Uwe Luebken (GHI)

Greg Bankoff (University of Hull): A Tale of Two Cities: The Pyromorphology of Nineteenth-Century Manila

Ayodeji Olukoju (University of Lagos): Fire Outbreaks in Metropolitan Lagos: Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Jason Gilliland (University of Western Ontario): Fire and Urban Morphogenesis: Patterns of Destruction and Reconstruction in Nineteenth-Century Montreal.

IV: The Impact of Fire

Chair: Sabine Häfner (GHI)

Andrea Henderson (Stanford University): Points of Origin: The Social Impact of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire

Dirk Schubert (HafenCity University, Hamburg): The Great Fire of Hamburg 1842: From Catastrophe to Reform

Cathy Frierson (University of New Hampshire): Late Imperial Russia's Fire Regime

V: Containing Fire

Chair: John McNeill (Georgetown University)

Amy S. Greenberg (Penn State University): Urban Firefighting and Infrastructure in Porfirian Mexico From a North American Perspective

Shane Ewen (Leeds Metropolitan University): Constructing Modern Fire Brigades: The Case of Edinburgh's Great Fire of 1824

Sara E. Wermiel (MIT): Did the Fire Insurance Industry Help Reduce Urban Fires in the United States in the Nineteenth Century?

VI: The Governance of Fire

Chair: Greg Bankoff (University of Hull)

Samuel J. Martland (Rose Hulman Institute of Technology): Taming Fire in Valparaíso, Chile, 1840-1880

Jordan Sand (Georgetown University): The Logic of the Burnable City: Property, Governance, and Fire in Edo-Tokyo

VII: The Politics of Fire

Chair: John McNeill (Georgetown University)

Nancy Haekyung Kwak (Brooklyn Polytechnic University): The Bukit Ho Swee Fire

Sofia Toufic Shwayri (University of Oxford): Beirut on Fire: From Traditional Suqs to a Modern Shopping Mall

Jérôme Tadié (L'Institut de recherche pour le développement): Fires, Urban Environments, and Politics in Contemporary Jakarta (1966-2007)

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