

Urban History and the Construction of Europe, a Strategic Alliance: The EAUH Conference 2026

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What follows is a series of reflections based on the documents received and the exchange of countless digital letters over the past year and a half. We will aim to focus on some elements for a renewal that can position urban history as one of the strategic fields in the construction of Europe. It is a quick sketch—ten brushstrokes—drawn from a city where urban history has enjoyed a distinguished trajectory—from Antoni de Capmany in the 18th century and Sanpere i Miquel in the 19th, to Carreras Candi, Duran i Sanpere, Jaume Sobrequés, and Ramon Grau in the 20th—albeit one that remains little known due to a lack of translations to date.

I have sought to present this in the form of a provocative, slightly iconoclastic decalogue. I hope you will forgive me.

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1 Utility. Urban history and city life (education, governance)

Can the world and its trajectory be explained through the lens of city networks? The answer is yes—and the best testing ground for this is the educational sector, particularly secondary education. Experimental results in education have shown that this approach is more enriching than viewing the world exclusively through the prism of nations and states. Moreover, this experimental approach to explaining the world—both near and far—could extend much further into the realm of knowledge for governance.

Today's world is changing at a pace perhaps unprecedented in history, driven by the convergence of galloping technological innovation and new geopolitics shaped by an emerging elite. In this context, studies in urban history—regardless of the era or subject—can offer an innovative perspective that broadens the horizons of practical life. Yet, achieving this may require slightly shaking up established frameworks of inquiry.

2 Organization. Urban historians on the move

Caught between technical innovation—now including the impact of AI—university bureaucracy, and a growing distance from the public, the field of urban history risks stagnating. Hence the effort to ensure the conference itself innovates in its formats, adopting a somewhat unorthodox approach.

Max Weber was a pioneer in exploring how organizational forms transformed power and society in ancient Greece. And there is a lot of research done on the fluctuations in knowledge production and the factors that shape them. In medieval Barcelona, for instance,

the Jewish quarter (*Call*) stands out for its intense intellectual productivity; this flourished when scholars from Jewish communities on both sides of the shifting frontier with Al-Andalus converged there. Following this initial "take-off," the community remained highly productive for over three centuries—from the mathematician and philosopher Bar Hiyya to figures like Ben Adret and Hasdai Crescas. We could also talk about late medieval Paris, the rivalry between Franciscans and Dominicans at the Sorbonne famously accelerated the emergence of new ideas.

Cases where intellectual output slows down and stabilizes have also been well documented. It is worth revisiting Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* and re-reading William Clark's *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (2006). When the primary goal of an academic career becomes securing personal prestige, innovation often stalls.

As we await the further impact of AI, we must begin to rethink strategies for collaborative work. Online meetings free up in-person gatherings from some of their less creative functions, as are those that serve merely to reproduce the university system. It must be said that the "iron cage" of the Bologna Process does not make things easy, despite its appearance of supporting the European intelligentsia. In *El Plan Bolonia* (2009), Carlos Fernández and Clara Serrano highlight how the process fundamentally entails a direct attack on the Enlightenment ideal of *sapere aude*. Furthermore, the fear of appearing insufficiently scientific before evaluation committees has fostered thematic hyper-specialization and the more empiricist versions of a not very productive neo positivism.

3. From hyper-specialization to transdisciplinarity (out of Bolonia)

Having moved beyond traditional "city biographies," the challenge for urban history has always been the diversity of its methodologies—derived from both historiography and other disciplines—which have not always successfully coalesced. By abandoning the study of urban society as a whole—deeming it too vast to grasp—urban history has often been relegated to the role of an erudite prologue to other fields of knowledge. This explains the difficulty in situating the discipline, regardless of how often some scholars revisit Topolski's *Methodology of History*.

As Marjatta Hietala notes in *New Challenges for Urban History: Culture, Networks, Globalization* (2013), academic urban history emerged from a scholarly critique of the "city biographies" of over a century ago; it drove a move towards thematic specialization and comparative approaches. Significant progress has undoubtedly been made along this path. Following an initial surge marked by the 1955 creation of the International Commission for the History of Towns in Rome—an organization oriented toward comparative research—came the launch of the *Journal of Urban History* in 1974 and a boom in scholarship during the 1980s, when Peter Clark established the first Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester. The EAUH was founded in 1989, continuing within this same comparative spirit.

The results have been plentiful, and sectoral research has been greatly refined through the comparative approach. Returning to Hietala, the author notes that "A key concern is why certain cities at particular times, for instance North Italian cities in the Renaissance, Antwerp in the 16th century, London in the 18th century, Berlin in the early 20th century and Helsinki in the late 20th century, are particularly innovative."

The transdisciplinarity inherent in such a statement demonstrates the capacity of good urban history to transcend boundaries. The problem arises when the comparative approach fails to go further in curbing the trend toward neo-positivist hyper-specialization and in finding rigorous ways to study cities—and their spheres of territorial influence—as such, while simultaneously facilitating comparison.

4. Comparison and multiscale (urban history & urban sciences)

Some studies have sought new scientific paradigms to discuss cities and territories, following diverse paths. In some cases, the approach even favours a view of space in the abstract. A prime example is the excellent 2013 thesis by archaeologist Marlous Craane—*Spatial Patterns: The Late-Medieval and Early-Modern Economy of the Bailiwick of 's-Hertogenbosch from an Interregional, Regional and Local Spatial Perspective*—which is grounded in the paradigm of Space Syntax theory. The risks inherent in such a topographic analysis—innovative yet abstract—are balanced by the value of its multi-scalar approach: "interregional, regional, and local."

We should not lose sight of the major methodological advances made in urban geography—a topic we will revisit—when adopting this multi-scalar perspective, which must operate in both directions. Far from being mere local entities that simply receive decisions and flows, cities—especially large ones—also transform states. For instance, Spanish urban planning and the laws governing urban growth in the nineteenth century are best explained by the dynamics of Barcelona (as described by Ramon Grau) rather than the other way around. It remains to be seen what Roth and Goerg will tell us on Friday.

All in all, comparing and scaling up do not merely add together; rather, they multiply both the possibility of situating sectoral aspects and, above all, of addressing the history of cities in a substantial way.

5. Towards a new paradigm of city monographs

To produce rigorous city monographs—far removed from the old style of urban biographies—one must first address the question of what constitutes a city. This is an inherently uncomfortable question when faced with a reality that, unlike that of states, lacks precise boundaries or origins—save for municipal limits, which are crossed daily. Without explicitly stating so, many urban history studies operate within a framework of mere local history; this inevitably implies an underlying, unacknowledged context of national history. This is a perfectly understandable, long-standing inertia. In his 2004 work *World City Network: A Global Urban Analysis*, Peter J. Taylor noted that "with the emergence of a state-centred political and economic world order from the Westphalia treaties to the late 20th century [...] cities became nationalized, mere components of states, cogs in national economies." Hegel's dictum still haunts the historiographical cosmos: "The State is [...] that which, for the first time, provides a content that is not only appropriate to the prose of history but actually generates it."

Yet, neither conceptually nor technically can it be maintained today that cities—especially large ones—cannot be regarded as substantive historical units. Urban historians are adept at conceptualizing and utilizing networks in their research on institutions, the economy, society, culture, and politics, but less so at 'putting them on the map'. This is evident even in specialized publications such as *The Journal of Historical Network Research* (2017).

The path toward a new paradigm for city monographs, far removed from the old 'city biographies', could be greatly facilitated by incorporating techniques from a sister discipline—geography—which has introduced remarkable technical and methodological innovations in recent decades but is less utilized by urban historians than one might expect. If a substantive history of a state is possible, then a history of a city—conducted with the requisite rigor—must also be achievable. This should serve as the foundation for studies that transcend mere comparative analysis; indeed, several sessions at the conference point in this direction.

6. Academy, scholars and public knowledge

In *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, published in 1995, Christopher Lasch argued that this new class "retained many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues" because it no longer shared obligations with its fellow citizens, having come to equate social mobility with geographical mobility. The new technocratic class has "withdrawn from common life."

What, then, of intellectuals? Applebaum draws on the classic work of Julien Benda—an enthusiast of European integration—regarding the betrayal by intellectuals of their Enlightenment role. She notes that they "come to betray the central task of intellectuals, i.e. the search for truth," to champion leaders, "however disastrous their impact on ordinary people and institutions."

Paradoxically, this entails both a great responsibility and a significant opportunity for urban historians, provided they combine intellectual legitimacy—derived from the relevance of their research—with social legitimacy, by creating knowledge that can be shared.

This is where the role of public history becomes strategic; it must by no means be reduced to a collection of methodologically loose participatory dialogues. On the contrary, authentic public history can incorporate and reconcile multiple memories, thereby addressing the growing trend of replacing urban history with an ethnography that retreats into fragmentary community memories. A multi-scalar approach within urban history allows these various memories to be situated within a broader explanatory framework. To speak only of memory while abandoning history is particularly dangerous in an era of revisionism and "fake news."

Furthermore, the engagement of university scholars with the educational and cultural spheres must address the way quite a few institutions—including city museums—are distancing themselves from history; across Europe, many have dropped the word "history" from their names. Barcelona, which makes history a central part of its identity, is rather an exception.

7. A marketplace of ideas (strategic knowledge clusters for urban history)

Under current circumstances, the EAUH is more necessary than ever. In Barcelona, we sought to experiment a little, and the EAUH structure proved to be highly flexible. It took little effort to move the conference away from the Fordist-Taylorist mechanics of paper presentations and certificate acquisition, shifting it instead toward a generative economy acting as an incubator for startups focused on urban historical knowledge.

As is well known, the notion of a "marketplace of ideas" stems from classical liberal thought—specifically from Milton and, above all, Stuart Mill—which advocated against state interference in freedom of expression. This seemed well-assured until new forms of suppressing speech re-emerged, albeit unevenly across different countries. In this context, it is important to note that operating freely is easier today for urban history than for historical research linked to nations and states—a fact that is highly strategic.

It is worth reconsidering the work of Joel Mokyr—from both practical and historiographical perspectives—particularly what he states in *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy*: "In Europe, heterodox and creative thinkers could find sanctuary in other countries and spread their thinking across borders." In contrast, China's version of the Enlightenment remained controlled by the ruling elite. Mokyr's concepts are suggestive to think about a practical "marketplace of ideas", but his approach also inspires research in urban history if we shift our focus from the level of states to that of cities.

The notion of a marketplace of ideas can foster interaction between institutions that have often operated in isolation within the field of history—such as universities and

museums—and now is an opportune moment to revitalize this connection. The idea for this conference originated eight years ago at the Barcelona History Museum's Research and Debate Centre. We are now on the verge of a paradigm shift regarding the relationship between historical research and museums, driven by the announcement—made by ICOM Cities, the Museum of London, and the University of Westminster—of the *Reimagining Research in and with City Museums* conference, scheduled for January 2027; notably, the deadline for paper submissions has been adjusted to await the outcomes of the current EAUH conference.

8. Democracy, geopolitics and urban history (city knowledge & city legitimization)

When Barcelona Mayor Joan Clos became the first mayor in the world to address the United Nations General Assembly in June 2001, he spoke on behalf of local governments; yet, throughout his address, he focused on the idea of cities rather than the abstract concept of local power. Building upon the work of his predecessor, Pasqual Maragall, in deeply transforming Barcelona, the national capital of Catalonia, at multiple scales, Clos structured his speech around cities as substantive entities, advocating for "urban social cohesion, sustainability, and city diplomacy vis-à-vis traditional states." He continued in Catalan, speaking about the capacity of cities to foster identity and promote peaceful daily coexistence: "To improve the living conditions of citizens worldwide—and I wish to say this in my mother tongue, expressing the sentiment of my city, Barcelona—we need stronger city governments, closer to the people, and more democratic."

It is worth highlighting today the joint chairmanship of this session by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (which will also attend the closing ceremony) and the representative on behalf of the Mayor of Barcelona, who is currently on an international mission, as well as the presence of the institutions and organizations that, together with the Consell de Cent Association, have made this conference possible. All of this is particularly compelling as we stand on the threshold of a wave of geopolitical shifts and rising authoritarianism, the outcome of which remains uncertain.

9. Ceci n'est pas une pipe: the EAUH Conference 2026 Barcelona

We hope this will not be just a short gathering of 1.002 attendees—much as Magritte's painting was not a pipe. This project of rigorous, open research—taking place simultaneously in academic halls and urban workshops—does not end on Saturday. The Conference aims to serve as an incubator for initiatives involving young people, adults, and retirees, the latter often possessing a wealth of experience.

We have sought to provide a supportive framework. It was important to accommodate challenging circumstances through special student rates, scholarships, and organizational assistance for unique cases. Equally important was incorporating the myriad suggestions regarding topics, formats, and groups proposed to foster research; indeed, the reflections exchanged via digital messaging number in the hundreds.

We have moved away from the Bologna model. As Weber noted, achieving new goals requires organizational innovation—a principle that holds even truer in the emerging world of online interaction, AI, and robotics. While conferences must certify attendance, in an era where everything can be done online, they must above all ensure an atmosphere of personal interaction that justifies the financial, environmental, and personal costs of travel, while moving beyond mere CV-building pressures.

We have endeavored to construct a solid structure. Overall, the entire Conference aligns with the theme of the Call for Papers, a focus reflected in the keynote addresses: today with Grau on the city of Barcelona; and on Friday with Roth on European railway networks and Goerg on links with colonial cities. Furthermore, the 97 indoor sessions have been closely integrated with 41 workshop-style visits across the city.

An intensive session-based structure, thoroughly prepared by many of the organizers to foster interaction—moving beyond the mere juxtaposition of presentations—with most attendees having submitted their full papers in advance. The aim is to encourage the formation of **Working groups and project incubators**; such initiatives are already being prepared by authors who, in many cases, had never met before.

Knowledge nodes. Key themes emerged from the ongoing collaboration with the session coordinators—among themselves and with the conference organizing committee. In a geopolitical context where networked cities can drive European integration amidst the crises facing nation-states, every effort was made to accommodate the proposals received—some of them involving the Barcelona-based institutions sponsoring the conference. Key thematic axes included East-West dynamics (spanning from Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey to the Western Mediterranean) and South-North connections (from the Mediterranean to the Baltic—I wish to pay tribute here to the late Antoni Riera). Other topics related to collaborative research between universities and museums, as well as methodological reflections on urban monographs and public history. I have mentioned only a few, for there are dozens in reality!

Topos and Logos. Urban history and historical geography have effectively reunited featuring, as said, 97 sessions, 773 papers, 41 workshop-visits, and 864 participants. These workshop-visits were the result of a remarkable effort in conceptualization and organization by many of the participating institutions, driven by the belief that this combination would yield significant long-term methodological benefits.

History, governance, and citizenship. It is significant that both the Council of Europe representatives and the Barcelona City Council delivered speeches that were far from merely ceremonial—much like the Council of Europe’s upcoming closing address, which is expected to focus on concrete proposals. And when we speak of governance, we also refer to the city’s civic fabric.

10. City Networks in Europe and Beyond: trails post Barcelona Conference

The success of the conference call is the result of a collective, cooperative effort—though the proposed title certainly played a part. Barcelona possesses a rich urban history, perhaps stemming from its trajectory as a stateless capital and the urban society’s consequent aspiration to historically legitimize its role as a European metropolis and the capital of Catalonia.

So many academic, cultural, and civic institutions have come together for this conference that it would not seem right for everything to simply end when we part ways. We intend to maintain the website preserving the legacy of the EAUH Conference 2026 Barcelona at least until the next conference, ensuring it remains a living digital library where authors can keep—and even improve—the papers they presented.

We also hope that these intense days bring us all closer to the academic, cultural, and civic fabric of Barcelona; it is an excellent setting to talk about “marketplaces of ideas”. Some years ago, the Barcelona History Museum—with which I have long been associated as director—launched the *Europa inter urbes project*; this might well serve as a fitting motto with which to conclude these remarks. Thank you very much.

Barcelona, 2 September 2026