

XIV. IS A MUSEUM THE MOST APPROPRIATE MEDIUM FOR THE DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION OF A MODERN CITY?

The Role of a Topographical Society

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IN THIS paper I seek to address this issue obliquely — not by discussing the role of a museum, but by considering the contribution to urban studies which can be made by a topographical society. A museum, we can safely assume, is a most appropriate medium for these studies. However, I believe it will be accepted that it is by no means the sole suitable medium, and I hope to demonstrate that a body such as a topographical society has a worthwhile contribution to make. I take for illustrative purposes the activities of the London Topographical Society, although I hope to extrapolate points of general interest and application from this discussion, rather than merely to narrate the London Topographical Society's functions.

A good starting place is to consider the points of distinction between an urban museum and a topographical society. A museum is a building for the exhibition of artistic or scientific objects; taken literally, a home of the muses. A topographical society differs in a number of respects. First, and most important, it is devoted to studying the features of a particular location. This is its paramount function to which all other activities are subsidiary adjuncts. It does not collect, conserve or exhibit. Instead it studies, publishes and lectures. Secondly, in distinction to a museum, it defines itself by relation to an activity rather than a permanent place of display. This, of

course, is by no means a necessary pre-condition, but what a society unburdened with responsibility for premises or staff lacks in visibility or permanence, it gains in flexibility and accessibility. I will return to this theme.

I should make two preliminary points. First, there is no such thing as a standard topographical society; each will define its area of study, range of period and scope of activities. The London Topographical Society takes the physical development of London and environs in all ages; other societies may encompass a wider or narrower physical location, time-span or theme, for example restricting themselves to transportation, building or economic activity.

Secondly, the body in question need not be a society in the sense of a voluntary association of individuals. It can equally well be constituted in some other fashion. For example, the Museum of London contains extensive material concerning the growth of London; the University of London runs post-graduate degree courses on London topography and urban history generally, while the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (a government body) publishes the learned *Survey of London*, a detailed topographic exposition of London which progresses on a district-by-district basis. Each of these bodies contributes to the study of the topography of London.

A topographical society, though, is rather different. As a voluntary association of individuals it can, like any local history society, define its objectives free from statutory obligations and the vicissitudes of municipal funding. It can engage in a range of activities of its choosing answerable only to its members and constrained only by the size of their subscriptions. As a free enterprise player in an arena denominated by state-funded bodies, a topographical society possesses the significant advantages of speed of response and flexibility of approach.

What, then, can a topographical society do? There is no fixed range of activities, but it is suggested that the core functions of such a society are publishing, lecturing and visiting. An urban museum can and will do all of these. However, with so many other responsibilities these tasks may not always receive the attention and resources that they deserve.

The first of these functions — publishing — is perhaps the area where a topographical society can make the most significant contribution and, incidentally, that upon which the London Topographical Society concentrates. Publishing material relating to urban history is an expensive and time-consuming business. Each work requires painstaking research, each illustration has to be identified, the publication carefully edited and the printer minutely supervised. The publications of a topographical society may be ones that would not otherwise see the light of day. The cost of production, the time commitment involved and the uncertainty of a market may combine to dissuade a museum from undertaking such work, unless perhaps in conjunction with a major exhibition, and a commercial publisher from even considering the venture. A topographical society, though, by using the unpaid labour of its officers and obtaining funding both from the subscription of its members and proceeds from the sale of other publications, can undertake such ventures in the assurance that it will not incur a financial loss.

It will be helpful to illustrate the kind of material that a topographical society can publish by mentioning some recent publications of the London Topographical Society, of which a full list appears in the annexed catalogue. These include a portfolio containing full-size reproductions of the Ordnance Survey Drawings of the London area in 1800; *Good and Proper Materials*, a study of London construction materials; *The London Surveys of Ralph Treswell*, an Elizabethan surveyor; and a reproduction with notes of Booth's *Poverty and Wealth Maps* of late Victorian London. It is submitted — with all due modesty — that these are scholarly and valuable contributions to the study of London topography and ones which, in the absence of the London Topographical Society, would not have been published.

It is important to explain how the London Topographical Society publishes works of such quality. It has some 1,000 members each paying an annual subscription of £20. This entitles the member to receive without further charge the year's publication, such as that described above. The London Topographical Society also sells its publications to the general

public, to booksellers and to institutions. Its income from this source is a further £10,000 per annum. Its annual income of £30,000 pays for the publications, each of which ranges in cost from £10,000 to £30,000, for despatch of the publications by post and general administration. By judicious management of costs and timing of publications (generally one or two per annum, issued in mid-summer) the London Topographical Society balances its books and sets aside a small surplus for future projects. The Society enjoys two particular advantages. First, as a charity it pays no tax on its income. Secondly no one (except the printer) expects to be paid for their services.

The members are predominantly individuals living in the London area, but there are over 100 institutional members such as museums and libraries throughout the world. A society such as the London Topographical Society is dependent upon a relatively stable membership to fund its activities. This it maintains, albeit with an annual turnover of some 5 per cent, by issuing a prospectus and also as a result of receiving regular reviews of its publications in the national and specialist press.

Lecturing and visiting are two further functions that fall within the purview of a topographical society. That the London Topographical Society does neither illustrates the diversity — if not idiosyncrasy — of voluntary societies. An extensive series of lectures on various aspects of London topography is offered by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, the Greater London Industrial Archaeological Society and other local history societies. A wide range of visits is conducted by the London Society.

Another distinct feature of a topographical society is accessibility. As an informal body a topographical society offers the opportunity for a non-specialist to become involved in urban studies. The lawyer, banker or author who studies urban topography as a recreation finds a platform for his lectures and a publisher for his treatise. Someone who is a participant rather than a contributor can attend the lecture or visit, and enjoy the publication. In both cases the circle of those who participate in urban studies is broadened, attracting those who might otherwise have little or no involvement in this area.

One further advantage gained from the constitution of a topographical society is that it can be very flexible. The lead time required for a publication can be as little as three months, which enables the London Topographical Society to react quickly to the offer of a manuscript, or a suggestion to publish some other work. Moreover, operating on a non-commercial basis, it can lavish time upon a publication.

In all of these ways a topographical society can build upon and augment the activities of an urban museum. The relationship, though, goes further than this, and it can be one of close co-operation and not just symbiosis. At its simplest a topographical society may hold its meetings in a museum's lecture theatre, sell its publications through the museum's bookshop and distribute its leaflets in the museum's foyer. The relationship, though, can be deeper and more significant. A topographical society may rely on the local museum's libraries, urban archaeologists and learned bodies for guidance on choice of publications, the provision of lecturers and, most important of all, the assurance of quality. In order to make a worthwhile contribution to urban studies, the topographical society's publications must be scholarly, its lectures informed and its visits stimulating. The connections between a topographical society and an urban museum, both at institutional and personal levels, help ensure this is achieved.

Taking again the London Topographical Society as an example, it enjoys a close working relationship with the Museum of London and frequently draws upon its professional resources. Several museum officers are members of its governing council, contributing their skills and experience to the Society's publications programme. The Society may publish works by members of the Museum of London's staff, while on other occasions the Museum itself, or other historic libraries in London, may supply an original work for reproduction, or provide the prospective author with facilities and materials for pre-publication research.

A topographical society can certainly benefit from working with an urban museum and the converse is also true. A society which offers a programme of lectures on urban history and topography, or a series of visits to historic sites in the locality,

will both provide a platform for the museum staff to address a wider audience, and also provide activities which may complement the museum's own exhibitions. Furthermore, a Society's activities can result in useful finds for a museum. Artefacts may be unearthed and sources of valuable oral history introduced to it.

The urban museum and the topographical society working together in their chosen spheres can each make a valuable contribution to the work of the other. The museum provides a focus for the society; the society undertakes activities which are ancillary to the museum's and, by drawing on a diverse membership base, increases those who benefit from the museum's services. So is the museum a fixed reliquary, and a topographical society an ephemeral contributor of occasional learned publications? I hope I have shown not.