



BOOK REVIEWS

Atlas of the Dutch urban block by *Susanne Komossa, Han Meyer, Max Risselada, Sabien Thomas and Nynke Jutten*, THOTH Publishers, Bussum, The Netherlands, 2005, 284 pp. ISBN 90-6868-382-9.

This atlas, which is anchored in typological and morphological research, explores one of the fundamental topics in the contemporary field of urban morphology, namely the dialectical relationship between the urban block and the fabric of the city. The atlas focuses on the Dutch urban block viewed as a 'reading unit' that reveals and reflects the grid and the fabric of the city, and shows its role in capturing urban morphological change over time.

A difficult question that underlies this work is whether the Dutch urban block has substantially changed or stayed the same over the course of the past four centuries. Much of the research done on cities, their elements and the structural units of the urban map starts from the assumption that with the modern movement there has been an irreparable split between the classic and the modern city, and that the loss of urbanity and urban qualities is connected with this break.

This book argues that this is only partially true and that in the Netherlands there has been a great deal of continuity from the seventeenth century ring canals to recent projects. In researching and explaining the changes that have affected the Dutch urban block in the past four centuries, the authors focused on Amsterdam and Rotterdam due to their similarities in size, land forms, and political and cultural development on the one hand, and their concentrated efforts to implement innovative projects, on the other.

One major virtue of this atlas lies in the manner in which the authors selected the nineteen projects, based on the hypothesis that each of these projects is a paradigm for a specific relation between urban plan typology and the urban block. More

specifically, the authors discuss and illustrate ten Amsterdam projects and nine Rotterdam projects. These range from the large-scale urban extension of the Amsterdam Ring Canals in the seventeenth century, to the urban expansions during the industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of the large urban blocks put in place after the Housing Act of 1890, and finally to the most recent ones, including the twentieth-century Java Island Amsterdam project and the twenty-first century Stadstuinen Rotterdam project.

Another virtue of this atlas lies in its concise, cohesive, standard form and presentation for each project, reflecting the authors' approach to both the urban block and the fabric of the city. For each project the authors briefly discuss the historical and cultural context in which it was shaped and document the overall continuity of the Dutch urban block by amply illustrating it with the aid of high-quality maps, drawings, cross-sections and photographs.

The authors managed to successfully document a great deal of continuity in the Dutch urban block by employing a project-by-project analysis and charting nineteen projects from 1615 onward using drawings of fragments of the city at a scale of 1:5000. The consistent use of drawings at this scale throughout the atlas allows the reader to understand and visualize the relationship between urban elements and the overall morphology.

This atlas reveals a clear, easy to follow two-tier structure centred on the presentation of nineteen Dutch projects in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and five relevant urban morphological essays addressing the urban tissue, dwelling types, urban block, mass housing and the drawing method.

The atlas starts with a concise introduction overviewing the authors' research goals, hypothesis, approach, and methodology, followed by Philippe Panerai's preface to the atlas which includes interesting thoughts on the development and evolution of urban fabric, the Dutch urban block viewed as a discrete urban unit, as well as on

the relationships between the urban block and the grid on the one hand, and the urban block and the plot on the other.

Based on both its original conceptual approach and clear graphic materials I warmly recommend the use of the *Atlas of the Dutch urban block* as a useful teaching and research tool in the fields of urban morphology, urban geography, urban planning, urban design, architecture and urban policy. I agree with the authors of this atlas that learning to read a map is an important element in the professional practice of architects and urban planners, and I might add in the study of urban form by undergraduate and graduate students. Furthermore, in addition to maps and drawings, this atlas also provides simple but important elements pertaining to dimensions, numbers, density and the average size of dwellings, which are useful in examining and understanding the characteristics and evolution of the urban block in particular and the urban fabric in general. Finally, for researchers and decision-makers, this atlas can be used as a reference work that assembles plans and information otherwise difficult to gather.

This book is very well designed and illustrated and offers important insights into understanding how urban change or urban continuity can be captured via 'reading' the morphological and chronological evolution of the urban block. It is clearly an important contribution to the field of urban morphology in general and urban morphological analysis at the urban block level in particular.

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The form of cities: political economy and urban design by Alexander R. Cuthbert, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2006, 304 pp. ISBN 1-4051-1640-4.

In *The form of cities: political economy and urban design*, Alexander Cuthbert has entered into an effective and multi-faceted dialogue with his own previous edited work, *Designing cities: critical readings in urban design*. (Yet another facet of this dialogue is contained in the longer version of Chapter 1 available on Cuthbert's faculty website at the University of New South Wales under the

'publications' heading). Both books are organized into the same ten parts: theory, history, philosophy, politics, culture, gender, environment, aesthetics, typologies and pragmatics. But whereas *Designing cities* is an anthology of 30 previously-published works by different authors, *The form of cities* is Cuthbert's effort to synthesize those and numerous other works within their theoretical and methodological contexts. As such, it reads as a broad survey of recent social theory in the context of the production of urban form.

Cuthbert's training in architecture, planning and economics and his subsequent years of experience in the design field are evident here in a wide-ranging exploration of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the production of urban form. His discussion moves beyond the classic canon of urban design to tackle such philosophical issues as 'what is history?' and 'what is sustainable development?' And his conceptualization of urban form is multifaceted, encompassing, integrating and contrasting 'forms' from the physical to the philosophical. Within these diverse discussions, however, he rarely strays far from the theme of 'political economy and urban design' with which he subtitled the book. In this perspective, urban form, in all its manifestations, is produced and co-produced through the dynamics, structures, and exercises of power in the political, legal, economic, social and cultural realms.

Each chapter of the book lays out a set of diverse ways urbanists, social theorists and other academics have approached its central theme. The first chapter, entitled 'Theory', surveys 'mainstream' urban design theory, political economy, and critical theory. A table and accompanying discussion portrays the different ways in which the fields of architecture, urban design, and urban planning have tended to view and/or operationalize different elements of the urban, including structure, environment, resources, objectives and behaviour. The theory chapter is concluded with a sharp critique, noting that the 'cult of the individual architect' has influenced urban design theory to a striking degree, so that the conceptualizations of urban form embodied in the theoretical literature tend to be unrelated, singular, and devoid of a basis in socio-economic and political practice.

The chapter on history, after a foray into the general theories of 'what is history?' focuses on an organizational scheme for the literature on urban history and change which centres on five types: chronologies, typologies, utopias, fragments, and materialist theory.

Cuthbert uses individual cities and the 'schools

of thought' associated with them as the organizational scheme for his chapter on philosophy. He presents these as the Vienna school (Wagner, Sitte); the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others, and sometimes Habermas); the Chicago school (Park, Wirth, Burgess); the Weimar and Dessau school (the Bauhaus: Gropius, Meyer, and Mies van der Rohe); the Paris school (Lefebvre, Castells and others); and the Los Angeles school (Scott, Soja, Dear, Wolch, Davis and others). Subsequent discussions in this chapter centre on semiotics, phenomenology, and Marxian political economy. The discussion of Marxian political economy as a philosophical system, and its relationship to urban design, provides an effective transition to the subsequent chapter on politics, which relates power and ideology to design in the public realm, with an emphasis on the writings of Lefebvre, Foucault and Marx.

The chapter on culture covers topics such as Modernism and Postmodernism, state control of culture, globalization, and 'the new ruralism/urbanism'. This last section, though it identifies the New Urbanism as a 'class-based reaction to perceived problems ...', has relatively little to say about the New Urbanism per se, and instead is focused on a phenomenon Cuthbert entitles 'the New Ruralism' in which new information technologies enable the lessening of urban/rural differences, and concepts such as 'heritage', 'nostalgia', 'cultural uniqueness of place', and 'cultural emblems' are used to produce and promote new types of space.

In his review of the literature on gender and urban space – in contexts such as society, patriarchy, capital, and the public realm, Cuthbert endeavours to summarize the main arguments in a wide ranging literature on gender and urban space. He sees the goal of such analysis as an effort to move closer to a 'truly democratic and non-sexist city', but recognizes that this is a long and difficult project for urban design.

The seventh chapter, on environment, focuses almost entirely on sustainable development and contends that cities are inherently unsustainable within the capitalist system, and that to try to make them sustainable through the mechanisms available to urban planners and designers may be counter productive in the end. Here Cuthbert, in my opinion, misses an opportunity to weave the classic ideas he presents from David Harvey's work into more contemporary theories and case studies of environmental justice. While there is merit in the argument that environmental 'sustainability' is

difficult, if not impossible, to attain through urban planning alone, this chapter could be strengthened with a more multifaceted analysis of the various environmental lenses through which urban analysis has been carried out in recent years – such as environmental justice and ecological footprint theory.

The last three chapters – aesthetics, typologies, and pragmatics – have particular relevance for urban morphology. In regard to aesthetics, Cuthbert contrasts perspectives such as Aldo Rossi's interpretation of the city as a work of art and Paul Clarke's view of aesthetics as an element in the production of symbolic capital. He includes subsections on mathematics, contextualism (especially Camillo Sitte and Gordon Sutton), rationalism, symbolic capital, regulation, and theming. The chapter on typologies is introduced with a discussion entitled 'Taxonomy, typology, morphology and system' which, much to my own personal disappointment, does not mention morphology except in the title. Nonetheless, Cuthbert makes a significant effort at categorizing (typologizing?) different typological schemes under three sub-headings: typologies derived from associated disciplines (Geddes, Doxiadis, E.T. Hall, Perrin); typologies derived from traditional urban design perspectives (Vidler, Yifchatel/Abel, Krier, Alexander), and 'implications' (typologies) from spatial political economy (Saunders, Castells, Soja, Appadurai, Foucault). The final chapter, entitled 'Pragmatics', focuses specifically on two factors in the production of knowledge in urban design: the relationships between the professions, universities, and urban design, and urban design as a socially sanctioned activity.

The form of cities is a wide-ranging and masterful literature review of works relevant to urban design practice and analysis. It falls somewhere between the categories of 'textbook' and 'academic work', to the extent that while it has much to teach, it would make difficult reading for a reader unfamiliar with the works it cites, many of which are not explained within the text. Nor are its case study examples easily understood without prior knowledge. However, an advanced student, or professional urban designer, planner, architect or geographer will find a wonderful array of 'food for thought' in this recasting of both classic and contemporary works.

As for urban morphology, despite, perhaps, its title, *The form of cities* does not make much use of the current work or even most of the historical antecedents of today's urban morphologists, save Anne Vernez Moudon, whose essay 'A catholic

approach to organizing what urban designers should know' was reprinted in *Designing cities*. (He also cites Jivén and Larkham's 2003 commentary on sense of place, authenticity and character in the *Journal of Urban Design* in his chapter on philosophy). Had Cuthbert looked beyond Moudon's 1992 work, he might have incorporated the issues, debates and theories of urban form embodied in the work of members of ISUF.

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Caribbean urban modernization: a typomorphological study of two towns in Guadeloupe (1928-2003) by *Katrine Dupré*, Department of Architecture, Tampere University of Technology, Tampere, Finland, 2004, 312 pp. ISBN 952-15-1162-1.

This is a beautifully designed book. The cover photograph shows a typical Caribbean house: small, with yellow stucco walls and red tin roof, juxtaposed to a large, white, modern, stucco building. What a perfect illustration for the subject of this study. The story could almost end there.

Imagine my surprise to find when I opened the book – a dissertation! Publishing a dissertation is fine, but it should be edited and restructured for an audience larger and more diverse than the dissertation committee. Not being privy to the dissertation committee's agenda, I was initially at a loss as to how to proceed. From my point of view, it is a perfectly acceptable dissertation, but it is, in all kindness, not ready to be launched on the cruel seas of academic scholarship. However, in this dissertation lie the seeds of a number of interesting monographs and perhaps even a more generalized, broad ranging work in the manner of Braudel, whom the author mentions as a source of inspiration.

As I read through this work, a number of questions arose that were suggested by the research and observations of the author. It occurred to me that I could best write about this dissertation by discussing those areas of interest that could and should be expanded upon. In doing so I may have some critical comments about the dissertation, but only in the sense that I think the author needs to step back herself and look at her subject more critically and in some cases in more detail.

Dupré's study is centred on two towns: Gossier, about 3 km to the west of Pointe-à-Pitre along the coastal road, and Trois-Rivières on the adjacent island of Basse-Terre along the coastal road to the city of Basse Terre. One of the statements that the author makes that indicates to me she has been too close to her subject, particularly Gossier, is that both towns are 'more alike than different'. From her own evidence, I see many more differences. About the only similarity is that both are located on a coastal road, but in the case of Trois-Rivières the coastal road is inland from the coast, perhaps by 1 km or so, whereas Gossier is truly a beach town. The author also describes both as unplanned ribbon developments. I would agree that that is true about Gossier, whose public buildings are spread out along the colonial road without apparent rhyme or reason, but in Trois-Rivières there is actually a city centre and the public buildings have a relationship to one another. This leads me to believe that someone guided the layout of this town. I think Dupré needs to do some more research on the founders and foundations of these towns. She does give the reader some broad generalities: Gossier was essentially a fishing village and Trois-Rivières was a plantation town. I need to know more. What were the names (if not faces) of these early founders? How was the land allocated? How was it surveyed? What was the land tenure system? Who were these early settlers – free blacks, Creoles, Europeans? Why Gossier? Why Trois-Rivières? There are many more questions to be answered if Dupré were to undertake a broad spectrum work, which I wish she would. However, if she sticks to a typomorphological approach, she should pick up the essential differences in the architecture of the stone buildings common to Trois-Rivières and the wood shacks of Gossier, both full of architectural charm.

Dupré does an excellent and detailed job of describing both modern and traditional floor plans. I would like more comparison and contrast, particularly of single-family dwellings with the new multi-family projects that have sprung up in recent times. Although I suspect apartment living is common in the cities of Guadeloupe, I think it was an innovation in the small towns. In investigating the impact of this life-style change, a sociological and anthropological approach might be most appropriate – speak to the inhabitants. There should be some interesting and valuable information gleaned from talking with those who have made the transition from traditional single family to apartment living. Dupré has included commentaries from ordinary people on other

subjects, which I particularly enjoyed.

And if she wishes to pursue the contrast with modernism, I would like to know more about the two architects she mentions – Ali Tur and Chérubin – and their buildings. Judging from the photographs and the author's own comments, most buildings in these towns are owner designed and built. Nevertheless, it is architects that set the standards and provide the ideal. Related to design and construction, I would like to know more about the permitting and inspection of construction. The author provides a fascinating comparison of the elevation drawing of a building submitted for a building permit and a photograph of the building as built. Surprise! These appear to be two different buildings.

Then there are the really big issues relevant to Caribbean countries today – tourism and preservation. Gossier has been a tourist destination since the 1930s, which is the era of a photograph Dupré provides of what appears to be a large resort complex dated 1936. Tourism has swelled Gossier to a population of 15 000 or more today. Unlike Gossier, Trois-Rivières has fallen on hard times. Not being on the beach, it has not been a tourist destination, but it does have a collection of interesting stone buildings, 100 of which survived the 1928 hurricane and subsequent modernization. Apparently the government of Trois-Rivières has been protective of these buildings and supportive of preservation. Gossier appears to be a typical beach town, but I am intrigued by Trois-Rivières to the point of planning a visit. If I do not see some preservation oriented work on Trois-Rivières soon, I may write an article myself, in which case Dupré can take her revenge on me.

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Lots of parking: land use in a car culture by John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, 2004, 308 pp. ISBN 0-8139-2519-3

This book delves into the mysterious and mundane topic of parking, and does so in a comprehensive, historical manner. Some of the major phenomena in the built environment of our times are parking lots, cars all over the place, the destruction of the pedestrian realm, the dysfunctionality of

downtowns, and the emergence of entirely new urban typologies such as the strip mall, suburban sprawl, and parking garages. Tremendous forces have shaped urban form for the better part of a century. They are linked to parking, but we seem to be ignorant of their exact nature. Or is it that we still stick with explanations of a quasi-religious nature that do not allow one to question pre-conceptions even in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary? Have we studied the actual phenomena using the scientific method? Actually, no: therefore this book is a very welcome addition to the new critical thinking about urban form.

I can heartily recommend this book to any urbanist, and to any person interested in urban structure. It contains information on the history of parking available nowhere else. Even if the reader is not specifically interested in parking lots, the fact is that twentieth-century urbanism is profoundly influenced by parking. What we naively imagine are urban downtowns and suburban precincts shaped by individual design decisions are nothing of the sort: the enormous needs of parking shape our cities, our houses, and eventually shape our psyche. We have so far ignored those forces, accepting the dogma that the car and easily-available parking everywhere were more important than urban structure itself. Few people seemed to notice that parking *replaces* urban structure and urban civilization.

We have seen downtowns destroyed – not by aerial bombing, but through the piecemeal demolition of perfectly good older buildings. In every case, the political process permitting such demolition promises replacement with 'taller and better' buildings, which are supposedly responses to the increased pressures of downtown space and rising real estate values. Nevertheless, what actually replaces many of those excellent buildings is a flat parking lot. 'Temporary' open parking somehow lingers for decades. This book studies the phenomenon like one would study a mysterious plague that turns vast regions of green growth into a desert. Aerial views of our cities clearly show that this 'plague' covers at times more than one-half of their total surface area. What about the urban forces that inexorably drive up buildings to become 'taller and better'? The myth of ever-higher density is undone by sprawl, and the lowest-density urban feature of them all is the vast open parking lot.

If a reader gets nothing else out of this book, at least he or she will discover a basic law of urban morphology: skyscrapers are linked to vast parking lots or monstrous parking garages the same way that a lizard is linked to its tail. There is no strict

separation, and if it ever occurs, it is only a temporary subterfuge to escape critical inquiry.

Paved parking lots obviously replace natural habitat. This self-evident reality has consequences reaching farther than is usually assumed. Because of the sheer extent of asphalted parking in today's megalopolises, they create major changes in drainage patterns (and threats of flooding from rainwater run-off), retain so much heat as to alter a city's climate, and pollute the groundwater.

In addition to setting up some preliminaries for studying real urban phenomena to revise the fanciful dogma of 'more cars for a better future', this book traces the history of parking. For example, it is interesting to read that the first open commercial parking lot is attributed to Max Goldberg of Detroit, opened in 1917 (although there is an earlier claim for Herman Schmitt in 1914). Surely this is a moment in history comparable to the invention of *Coca-Cola* in Atlanta by John Pemberton in 1886. Both were American inventions that had enormous effects on civilization all around the world. (Other commentators might wish to judge whether those developments were positive or negative!).

We are also treated to a history of parking garages, which is sadly a history of retrogression. I say this because the first multi-storey garages were apparently well designed, with beautiful façades blending into the urban fabric, and multi-use interiors that made their users comfortable. These developed, as everyone can verify, into monofunctional concrete dungeons, which are in most cases just as grim and unsafe as they look. The new parking garages (that is, built since the 1950s) intrude into the urban fabric like concrete Second World War bunkers, making no effort whatsoever to connect via mixed use or pedestrian scale. What happened was a certain stylistic development, in this case for the worse.

I was pleased to discover that Victor Gruen comes out as a hero who early on opposed the parking/skyscraper solutions that gutted our city centres. It is a pity that no one paid attention to him, or to Jane Jacobs, who wrote about human, pedestrian urban scale at about the same time.

The authors of this book do not look at anything outside the United States. This is an American history of parking: not a theoretical treatise, but a detailed history, from which a perceptive urbanist can draw the right conclusions. The authors do not offer dramatic and radical solutions for taming parking lots gone wild, but stop at simply describing the phenomenon. That is a necessary first step, for which we can all be grateful. Neither do they address parking problems in the suburbs, their study being limited to commercial parking in the city. Thus, the residential garage – which shapes contemporary suburbia – is left unexplored.

Readers should, however, be made aware that there exist practical solutions, which can regenerate life in our cities and suburbs. All we need is to implement them: perhaps we shall unavoidably step on a few planning authorities' toes; but it has to be done. Other authors have given both practical and theoretical suggestions. In these I loosely include the group of 'New Urbanists' as well as those who propose the 'Network City'. Though quite distinct in their theoretical foundations, both these groups of urbanists (which include Christopher Alexander, Andrés Duany, Léon Krier, Elisabeth Plater-Zyberk, David Sucher, myself, and many others) understand the city as a living structure, and know how to save it from parking toxicity.

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Transmitting Architecture

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