Anglophone squint and transatlantic myopia

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Jeremy Whitehand has discussed in two editorial comments in *Urban Morphology* the symptoms of what he identified as anglophone squint (Whitehand, 2003, 2005). My reading of two recent urban design texts suggests the need to broaden this diagnosis. While both books are very wide in their scope, particular attention will be given here to the symptoms they reveal of anglophone squint and the extent to which the field of urban morphology is considered. For comparison, the extent to which these books refer to space syntax, another approach to urban analysis but of mainly anglophone origin, will also be considered. The books also throw light on topics discussed in a very recent editorial in *Urban Morphology* (Whitehand, 2011) and a ‘viewpoint’ (Kropf, 2011) in the same issue.

Companion to urban design

The first of these publications is a 700-page tome, *Companion to urban design* (Banerjee and Loukatiou-Sideris, 2011). Produced and published in the United Kingdom, it purports to be an ‘authoritative and comprehensive companion...that includes core, foundational, and pioneering ideas and concepts. Such a volume will serve not only the students and future professionals but also the teachers and practitioners of urban design’ (p. 2) – a formidable ambition.

The editors are based in the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles respectively. The book includes 52 chapters organized in nine parts. Of the 58 authors, 43 are based in the United States, four are from Canada, four from Australia, two from the UK and one each from Germany and Italy. Only two of the authors are practitioners, although the bibliographic sketches note that many of the academics claim to be practitioners as well.

The American authors represent a wide range of perspectives and many of them are widely acclaimed contributors to the literature of urban design. But this North American bias leads to significant omissions. It is regrettable that there is a complete absence of any reference to the Conzen-Caniggia nexus in Part 3, despite the fact that this section of the book is devoted to the ‘significant body of knowledge that informs the field of urban design [that] is generated from other disciplines’ (p. 2) and includes a chapter by a geographer (Ford, 2011). Two of the other authors, Talen and Scheer, are certainly familiar with the field but have made contributions on other topics to this volume. One could argue that perhaps the founding fathers of urban morphology are too esoteric and their influence on the practice of urban design remains regrettably marginal in the anglophone countries. However, even a figure such as Aldo Rossi, on the edge of that nexus (*pace* our Muratorian colleagues) and who was so iconic in the international architectural discourse of the 1980s and who has been widely translated, fails to get a mention anywhere in the volume.

There is another omission which suggests that any anglophone squint is exacerbated by trans-
Atlantic myopia. Although Part 4 addresses ‘the
technologies and methods that have influenced or
even transformed the practice of urban design at
various scales’ (p. 3), there is no consideration of
space syntax. From an urban design theoretical or
practice viewpoint, given the way concepts of space
syntax have permeated practice, this is an even
more surprising omission than that of urban
morphology. This is despite the fact that one of the
early chapters points out that a bottom up,
incremental approach to urban design ‘would
evolve into several important theoretical areas,
including new urbanism and space syntax’ (Birch,
2011, p. 18). As might be expected, New
Urbanism has one of the longest entries in the
index, but this tantalizing citation is the only
mention of space syntax. This omission is the more
surprising since Carmona, one of the two British
contributors, is based in University College
London, the academic home of space syntax. He
writes on design coding, which is arguably one of
the least relevant British contributions to the wider
current practice of urban design given its more
extensive application elsewhere in modern times.

Anglophone squint is exacerbated by the sole
Italian contributor, based in Milan Polytechnic,
who chooses to review urban design teaching in
English. He makes the assertion that ‘teaching of
urban design is mainly done in English’ (Palazzo,
p. 46) and moreover ‘urban design’s language,
literature, and terminology is mainly in English’
(Palazzo, p. 47). There is no discussion of how the
UK’s mainland European neighbours manage to
train architects and town planners who handle
urban design problems at least as well, or just as
badly, as their anglophone counterparts without the
benefit of urban design courses in English.

Not all the authors suffer from introversion. For
example, Forsyth (2011), in a wide-ranging review
of new towns, gives considerable attention to the
British contribution as well as referring to other
European and Asian experiences, and Fishman
traces the shifting post-Haussmann paradigms across
Europe and the United States (Fishman,
2011). But these two are accounts of history. It is
the accounts of current practice that are so focussed
on America.

To be fair, at the end of the book the editors
admit to three lacunae. The first is ‘the absence of
a comprehensive global perspective’ owing to a
primarily North American view and a bias that
reflects ‘the English language’s dominance of the
relevant literature’ (pp. 687-8). They also confess
to neglecting ‘such important areas as historic
preservation and urban conservation’ and a failure
‘to address the question of best practice’ or ‘the role
of urban design in shaping the built environment of
a hot, crowded and endangered planet’ (pp. 687-8).

In spite of the eminence of its contributors this
Companion can hardly be considered to achieve its
intention, manifesting as it does both an anglo-
phone squint and a severe condition of transatlantic
myopia.

New urbanism and beyond

The defects of the Companion are emphasised
when comparison is made with another collection
of urban design writings (Haas, 2008). This is also
a large volume (350 pages) with 61 chapters by 67
authors, 20 of whom are based outside the United
States and 17 of whom are professionals (that is,
non-academics). It shares five authors with the
Companion to urban design
and while it includes
Duany and Calthorpe, two of the founding fathers
of New Urbanism, it also presents contributions
from such eminent figures as Peter Hall, Jan Gehl,
Bill Hillier and Manuel Castells, who are not
usually associated with the New Urbanist
movement.

Its wider geographical coverage presumably
derives from its origins in a conference held in
2004 in the Royal Institute of Technology,
Stockholm. While one might dispute the claim on
the dust cover that it is ‘the first complete primer on
urban design’, in its geographical scope and range
of topics it provides a more authoritative and
comprehensive companion than the Companion
itself, despite the fact that its starting point is New
Urbanism and that it omits any reference to the
wide field of urban morphology.

Conclusion

The lack of consideration of urban morphology in
both volumes underlines the point made in the
latest Urban Morphology editorial, which notes that
‘channels of communication are ill developed
between, on the one hand, the research frontier and,
on the other, knowledge users’ (Whitehand, 2011,
p. 95). It also emphasizes the importance of the
questions posed by Kropf (2011) in the same
number as to whether urban morphology has ‘a
clear and communicable conception’ of its insights
and whether it has ‘a language that can engage with
people involved in the process of planning and
regeneration?’ (p. 157).

With respect to the omission of urban
morphology, perhaps it might be claimed that it is the perceived irrelevance of European urban morphology to urban design practice and theory as seen from the other side of the Atlantic that has led to its exclusion from the Companion. That this may be a too simple an explanation is suggested by a similar neglect of space syntax. The omission of any reference to urban morphology in the second volume discussed here is more serious because of its wider coverage. However, given that this work was produced by an American publisher, presumably with an eye to the internal market, it may be that, as with other commodities, the United States market is so large and dominant that products originating from outside are considered to be of minor interest.

References

What is an urban morphologist?

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Superficially, the question ‘what is an urban morphologist?’ seems easy to answer: an urban morphologist is someone engaging in urban morphology! However, though there have for long been definitions of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, much less attention has been given to those who pursue that knowledge. They belong to many different disciplines: architectural history, architecture, art history, geography, history, sociology and urban planning, to name a few. In fact the variety of disciplines gives strength to urban morphology: manifold perspectives are brought together in a broad discourse. Urban morphology gains much, especially methodologically, by encompassing so many kinds of researchers. Indeed it may be seen as a vanguard scientific field, in which interdisciplinary and transnational work was characteristic long before it became fashionable more widely. Let me offer a few amplifications of this characterization.

The attribution ‘urban morphologist’ should reflect the scope of the work involved: urban form might be described as the result of numerous shaping processes in varying social layers at a given place through time. This description is indicative of the different academic disciplines that engage in urban morphology. It is even more indicative of the fact that urban morphologists encounter a variety of distinct and sometimes antithetical features, such as tangible form and intangible processes, present facts and reconstructions of the past, shared usage and individual creation. Moreover, the object of interest to the urban morphologist is a living phenomenon, comprising the products of a variety of agents and agencies with their varying ideas about life and the city.

At the same time an urban morphologist employs methods and develops techniques that facilitate the description and understanding of past
and present conditions, as well as potential futures, using both theoretical and practical approaches. Especially with respect to methods and techniques, this broad scope allows for drawing on the diverse resources of the different disciplines to which researchers belong. But not every method from every discipline is appropriate and there is not a satisfactory simple categorization or evaluation of cities. To attempt to render them in such ways is bound to end in shortcomings. It is necessary to set out clearly the scientific aim of the endeavour and make clear that the categories and criteria involved are inherent in the study rather than the study object.

This becomes evident especially in those cases where the more exact methods of the natural sciences are employed in a mistaken or misleading way. Examining urban form for its complexity, for instance, is a challenging task. While there is obviously the possibility of mathematically analysing aerial photographs, the benefit of such an analysis is still unclear. However, it is surely questionable to suggest that the ‘fractal complexity’ of a two-dimensional image fully captures three-dimensional urban form and its utilization. It is even more questionable to introduce numerical values for the description of this complexity and equate greater complexity with a better layout. Urban form cannot be satisfactorily reduced to numbers. Even a combination of various arithmetic or statistical parameters will not reflect its complexity. Moreover, a promisingly clear numerical table or graph relating to urban form might have disastrous consequences in urban planning or civic policy.

The complexity of urban life throughout urban history is reflected in urban form, and its full understanding requires methods from both the humanities and life sciences. When the research topic brings together academics of different backgrounds, it is necessary for those involved to consider the findings of their research both in their original discipline and more widely. Thus urban morphologists, more than most researchers and practitioners, need to transcend their academic backgrounds.

An illustration of failure to transcend academic background was provided at the Tenth International Conference on Urban History in Ghent in 2010 when a historian gave his personal report on the French President’s commission to develop urban proposals for the metropolis of Paris in the twenty-first century – a task that was meant to compete with the ‘Grand Travaux’ of Sarkozy’s predecessors in office. Unexpectedly, this Greater Paris plan was not entrusted to the usual planners and bureaucrats but became the subject of an international competition. For this competition each of the ten architects invited to compete created a working group, which included other architects, planners, landscape architects, geographers and sociologists, as well as historians – such as the reporting colleague. This historian, having pointed out the somewhat meagre planning results of the whole competition, harshly criticized the working together of the group members. He was especially vexed by the lack of respect for his expertise as a historian, which he felt gave him a significant role in evaluating the different proposals within his team. Unfortunately he had confused the worth of his academic expertise with the practical contribution he was expected to make to a shared planning endeavour concerning the future of Paris.

The major problem in this team work was that the academics involved were not able to communicate effectively with each other. They did not acknowledge one another’s expertise. Nor did they appreciate the different contributions that could be made for the benefit of the project. Different academic backgrounds can enrich discussions and generate different approaches. But it is not so much the value that those approaches provide individually that is important. More important is the basis they provide for joint work. There is little to be gained by retreating into particular academic niches. Urban morphologists more than most gain strength from intensive exchange.

Recent contributions to this journal on ‘understanding place’ suggest that there remains a need for urban morphologists to broaden the dissemination of their findings across a range of disciplines and fields of practice. This perspective accords with the ideas of Ivor Samuels, who has pointed out the shortcomings of an English Heritage publication on the principles and practice of historic area assessments, and criticized its lack of interdisciplinary communication (Samuels, 2010, p. 122). It also accords with Hiske Bienstman’s plea for a ‘much more rigorous methodology’ based on urban morphology in similar work in The Netherlands (Bienstman, 2011, p. 75).

Within our changing scientific world there is an imperative beyond the learning and employment of new methods, and beyond the acknowledgement of different backgrounds and approaches. Urban morphologists need to not only share their ideas on urban form but to engage in collaborative projects to work effectively in an interdisciplinary way. This is not just a matter of the increasing size of
research projects, involving large numbers of participants. Smaller projects also benefit from multidisciplinary expertise and such collaborations appear to be particularly necessary where practical applications are involved, and are increasingly important in obtaining research funding.

What is an urban morphologist? As one begins to explore behind this question, a large field for discussion and collaboration opens up.

References

Urban morphology in planning practice

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The development of sound linkages between morphological explanation and planning prescription needs to be grounded in an assessment of current practice. Three issues in particular need assessment. First, what morphological aspects are already integrated? Secondly, what is the ‘demand’ for new morphological support? And, thirdly, what can urban morphology in fact offer to planning practice and development control (Oliveira, 2011) – what is the ‘supply’? Although it might be expected that there would be contributions on this subject in the literature, systematic surveys of planning practice from the standpoint of urban morphology are actually quite rare (Hall, 2008).

A recent survey of Portuguese planning practice provides the basis for a discussion of the first of the three issues identified above. This survey involved an assessment of the municipal plans – the so-called Planos Directores Municipais (PDM) – of the main cities of the eighteen districts of the mainland of Portugal. These cities are: Aveiro, Beja, Braga, Bragança, Castelo Branco, Coimbra, Évora, Faro, Guarda, Leiria, Lisboa, Portalegre, Porto, Santarém, Setúbal, Viana do Castelo, Vila Real and Viseu. The PDM is the main instrument of the Portuguese planning system. It establishes the model for the spatial structure of the municipal territory and defines the strategy for local development, including all the relevant national and regional policy guidance and investment commitments. This plan is composed of a regulatory code, a number of maps defining the different land uses, urban systems, and priority areas for operational planning and management, and another map with local rights of way and planning restrictions.

The assessment of the plans in force in these eighteen Portuguese cities (summarized in Table 1) reveals the incorporation of morphological aspects in most of these planning documents. Nevertheless, five cases were identified (Braga, Castelo Branco, Évora, Guarda, and Vila Real) in which the morphological dimension did not exist at all. However, the plans for Lisboa and Porto (particularly the latter) do exhibit a solid integration of morphological aspects.

The analysis of the different parts of each plan revealed that this process of incorporation is more difficult in some parts than in others. Indeed, it proved quite difficult to find concern for the physical form and structure of these cities in the goals and objectives of plans. Certain morphological criteria seem to be more readily integrated: for example, guidance on street width, plot width, depth and degree of land permeability, building coverage, building height, width, depth and type, and certain architectural elements. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these criteria were used in the definition of planning zones and their boundaries – a crucial theme recently explored by Larkham and Morton (2011) and Whitehand (2009) in this journal. Nor does it mean that widely applicable morphological methods and techniques have been used in the delimitation or regulation of these zones.

The results from this survey do not seem to have a straightforward rationale. While the year of preparation of plans (the sample includes PDMs prepared and concluded between 1994 and 2010 under the framework of three different decrees) does not seem to influence the presence of a morphological dimension, three other factors seem to affect (but not determine) it. The first factor is the geographical location of cities. Cities along the Portuguese coastline seem to have better plans (in
Table 1. Presence of morphological elements in Portugal’s Planos Directores Municipais

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Different aspects of the PDM</th>
<th>Goals and objectives</th>
<th>Territorial model: planning zones</th>
<th>Plan implementation mechanisms</th>
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<td>Definition of the planning zones</td>
<td>Criteria for the regulation of planning zones</td>
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<td>Aveiro</td>
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<td>Beja</td>
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<td>Braga</td>
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<td>Castelo Branco</td>
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<td>Coimbra</td>
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<td>Évora</td>
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<td>Faro</td>
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<td>Guarda</td>
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<td>Leiria</td>
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<td>Lisboa</td>
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<td>Portalegre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Porto</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Santarém</td>
<td>O</td>
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<td>Setúbal</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viana do Castelo</td>
<td>O</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vila Real</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Viseu</td>
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</table>

+ strong presence  O presence  — absence

morphological terms) than cities located in the interior of the country. The second factor is the size of cities expressed by their resident population (the sample includes cities with from 25 000 to 545 000 inhabitants): larger cities tend to have better plans than smaller ones. The last factor is the composition of the planning teams. Planning teams co-ordinated by external consultants tend to produce better plans than planning teams exclusively composed of members of local authority departments.

The PDM for Porto proved to have the best results within the selected sample of plans. The excellence of this plan in the Portuguese context was considered by Oliveira (2006). Indeed, the Porto PDM adopted a typological approach to zoning that started with the identification of ten types of tissue covering the whole municipal territory in a quite rigorous and comprehensive way. In accord with the main goal of maintaining the character of the city, the zone boundaries and regulations correspond, for the most part, to the tissues identified in analysis. The plan considers the existing forms of each type of tissue as potential solutions for accommodating the human needs in that specific part of the city. Accordingly, the bases for the forms prescribed for each particular application for a building permit are the buildings within the same street or plot series. The Porto PDM allows both mixture within zones and control of uses, establishing a range of potential uses for each new built form and a number of restrictions to avoid the least acceptable ones.

The analysis of this sample of Portuguese municipal plans showed that urban morphology does affect planning practice, but the way this happens does not necessarily conform to the priorities of urban morphologists. The process of
diffusion of morphological knowledge is unsystematic and slow. While this is a problem that should be carefully considered, it does not differ much from the situation in other social sciences or even from the relationship between theory and practice within planning itself. Urban morphologists should continue to make efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice, developing systematic surveys in various planning contexts, trying to understand planning practitioners’ needs and aspirations, and testing the relevance and diffusion potential of their research.

References


Typomorphological ideas and the development of public places: the case of China’s Jiangnan watertowns

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China is a country with a long and rich urban history but today’s rapid urbanization process is posing major problems for decision-makers seeking to retain the unique character of historical cities. A particularly challenging area is the Yangtze River Delta. With its dense network of rivers and canals, it has been home to the distinctive Jiangnan watertowns for several thousand years. Unfortunately, recent urban growth in these towns has occurred with little consideration having been given to the traditional characteristics of public space. On the contrary, overseas models have been imitated that have little relevance to Chinese urban planning. We should like to offer here a few observations on how the problem can be tackled by using a typomorphological approach.

According to Chen and Gu (2009) the typomorphological method employs an integrated framework for understanding urban physical structure and its formative process. Although exploration of the Jiangnan watertowns using this method is only just beginning, some preliminary work is already providing valuable experience about spatial typologies. The spatial typologies referred to here are derived from several field studies of traditional watertowns over the past 3 years, and provide valuable cultural elements to consider in the design of public places within urban developments taking place both in and around traditional watertowns and more widely.

Songjiang, a watertown with more than 2000 years of history, is currently developing in accord with the ‘One city and nine towns’ urbanization plan for Shanghai (Shanghaishi renmin zhengfu gongbao, 2002). The plan accommodates the rapid growth of Shanghai by developing the surrounding towns into one much larger city, and attempts to introduce Western design ideas, but reflecting Shanghai’s history, in each of the nine towns. Songjiang has many important watertown features even after industrialization during the middle of the twentieth century, but unfortunately recent development includes overly large public spaces, such as People’s Square, and parks with little or no relationship to the waterways. The large parks of the new Green Belt are forbidding after dark, have raised concerns about public safety, and have taken up valuable farmland. The Western contribution to Songjiang is a ‘Thames town’ with replicas of English architecture along the main lakefront, limiting public access to the water. Such public places fail to engender consciousness of identity, and play a lesser role in the cultural aspects of urban life than the traditional watertown spaces. Development of this type risks losing the watertown’s soul by importing clusters of eccentric architectural buildings from overseas and creating oversized urban spaces.
Table 1. Spatial typologies observed in the Jiangnan watertowns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public spaces</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Uses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lanes</td>
<td>Narrow (2-6 m wide)</td>
<td>Pedestrians (possibly bicycles)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Along waterfront, may have roof covering</td>
<td>Mixed use: small-scale retail and restaurants, hotels, small galleries and museums, some residential</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stone pavement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alleys</td>
<td>Very narrow (&lt; 2 m wide)</td>
<td>Pedestrians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stone pavement</td>
<td>Lead to residences (often ending in small courts that provide access to more than one residence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridges</td>
<td>Stone construction</td>
<td>Valuable public space for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of openness</td>
<td>Traditionally used by merchants for making business deals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seating to each side and may also have roof covering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocket spaces</td>
<td>Leftover spaces between buildings along waterfront or prominent lanes</td>
<td>Valuable public space for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often with Chinese garden elements (seating and planting)</td>
<td>Traditionally used for family clan events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimate, small-scale spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious spaces</td>
<td>Located at Buddhist or Taoist temples along waterfront or prominent lanes</td>
<td>Religious spaces for the worship of local deities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temple compounds containing courtyards and Chinese gardens</td>
<td>Traditionally used by scholars for teaching students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May also contain pagodas and towers</td>
<td>Valuable public space for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimate, small-scale spaces</td>
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Gu (2001) introduced the benefits of ‘morphologic analysis’ in spatial typological studies. The public spaces in the traditional watertowns have characteristic traditional features (Table 1). In contrast to the blank and vacant spaces of the recent development in Songjiang, the public spaces in the Jiangnan watertowns bustle with the daily life of the townspeople and inquisitive tourists, and are strongly rooted in the cultural and spiritual aspects of the people. The principles of both Taoism and fengshui contain ideas of water as a powerful element that is capable of directing positive energy within the town to enrich the community. The natural and man-made waterways define the landscape in a fluid and organic manner. The watertowns are intensively developed with one- or two-storey buildings to make the best use of the limited land, but despite the dense development there are numerous public open spaces along the waterways and lanes. The waterways historically provided economic transport, but there are also pedestrian lanes only a few metres wide, some less than 1 m wide, that criss-cross the built-up area, with bridges at significant locations. The elegant stone bridges are among the most evocative features. They contrast with the enclosed narrow lanes and alleys and are spaces for social interaction, sometimes even having roofs and seating. The public open spaces are small scale, intimate, and incorporated into the built environment, with a strong sense of community. They are also characterized by a variety of uses from daily functions to significant religious, family and cultural events.

Chen and Romice (2009) discuss the value of a typomorphological approach in maintaining cultural identity in historical Chinese cities, and certainly these traditional space typologies are worthy of consideration in the design of contemporary public places in traditional watertowns. A good example of the benefit of traditional spatial concepts is the design for the Fangta Park by Professor Feng Jizhong in Songjiang. The park design was widely debated on its completion and has recently become
a topic of discussion again. It combines China’s rich history with recent urban planning ideas, including those from the West (Wu, 1996). The 12.8 ha park was designed around a pagoda and bridge from the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), some intricately carved screen walls from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), and a Ming dynasty temple that was relocated to the site. The historical relics were left in their original locations, and a series of planted screens, walls and earth mounds were used to control viewpoints through the park. The ground around the pagoda is lower than the surrounding park and the main entry paths step down to a new sunken square, which allows viewing of the pagoda (using the 65 degree viewing angle observed in traditional pagoda spaces). The sunken square has no view of the surrounding park and contains no new planting, so that attention is focused on the pagoda and an ambience is created for moral and religious thinking. According to Zhao et al. (2007), this design captures the essence of Chinese landscape design for modern people in a modern society.

In 2001-2, the Italian architects Gregotti Associati International won a design competition for a new town at Pujiang. The design is based on Italian urban design principles, but it also has resemblances to traditional Chinese watertowns. The design employs two orthogonal axes and a grid pattern to organize the spaces of the town (Gregotti Associati International, 2002). Although the canals are largely used to distinguish different neighbourhood blocks, there are some street-facing residences that back onto canals. This arrangement provides a link to the waterways similar to that in the traditional watertowns.

The application of typomorphological method to explore the Jiangnan watertowns is only in its very early stages, and more in-depth research, including plan analysis (Whitehand and Gu, 2007), is necessary. However, these preliminary observations on spatial typology in a particular Chinese context offer food for thought for those designing new public places in traditional watertowns. These new places should be designed to reflect the existing spatial typology in such a way that continuity is maintained with traditional spaces. This will give a strong sense of place and identity, reflecting watertown origins. Further investigation will both improve understanding of the watertowns and allow typomorphology to be further developed as a decision-making tool to be used more widely in influencing contemporary urban growth in historical Chinese cities.

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References


Government plans to redevelop urban villages (chengzhongcun in Mandarin) in South China have been on the books for more than a decade, but it is only in the last few years that these plans have come to fruition. The villages initiated the first wave of redevelopment, mostly respecting the historical street layouts and building footprints, as Lin, De Meulder and Wang (2011) describe in their detailed account of the build-up in one such village in Guangzhou. The replacement projects deserve comment for the radical transformation they propose. Why do these plans consistently describe wholesale destruction of the building fabric and obliteration of any traces of the original layouts? What do they propose in their place?

Many observers have noted that village-initiated redevelopment was a product of the urban-rural divide, enshrined in the Chinese constitution, which essentially granted villagers full control over their lands while denying them access to the benefits of urban citizenship. The village response was to rebuild on the historical layout with the intention of extracting value from the villagers’ homes. Cities rolled out new urban plans that were at once modernist, monumental and representational, in stark contrast to the pragmatism of village building practices. At the end of the last decade, those urban plans were mostly complete, resulting in a tissue of grand avenues, super-blocks and high-rise buildings. The villages consist of narrow, winding streets, small blocks and low-rise buildings. Local governments have initiated negotiations with villages in key, central locations to purchase the land rights of the rebuilt villages, with the intention of ‘completing’ the urban plan. The widely expressed government view is that village developments are essentially pre-modern and have no place in the contemporary Chinese city. While the cities could have proposed compensation commensurate with village revenues, they have chosen instead an alternate implementation plan as the vehicle for negotiation.

The typical approach is for the city to engage a developer in the early stages of the process, quite often a state-owned development company, who then represents the interests of the city. At the same time, the city hires consultants to prepare a plan that presumably represents optimal re-use of the lands. It is this ‘optimal’ plan that becomes the object of negotiation. Unconstrained by the density limits of the statutory plan, which does not apply to villages, the proposed densities have been exceptionally high for Yunong and Gangxia villages in Shenzhen and Liede in Guangzhou, the floor area ratio exceeding 7 in all cases. These densities are more than double those in the statutory plan areas surrounding the villages. Higher density means more value is extracted from the development, allowing the city to recover a larger share of the payout to the village. The consultants’ plans show bulky and very tall buildings on standardized layouts, in keeping with city desires for an image of advanced modernity. The latest plans for Gangxia village show office buildings 350 m high.

There are tentative attempts by consultants to find an alternative to this model. One approach is to demolish selectively and integrate new, high-rise buildings in the historical layout. Another approach is to preserve the temples, monuments and organic street layouts with an entirely renewed residential building fabric. These approaches have found favour with the villages, in their bid to satisfy government desires for modernization while maintaining control of village space. So far, such approaches have been rejected by the cities that see such plans failing to deliver a wholly integrated plan of contemporary forms. A second wave of village-initiated redevelopment might be feasible and potentially relieve the city of a major financial burden, but such an approach deprives the bureaucracy and the state-owned development companies of significant benefits that flow from city manipulation of the land resource. Thus, the city leadership and the bureaucracy find common cause in sweeping away any reminders of a rural past and a problematic urban-rural dichotomy in the present.

Village redevelopment is in its earliest stages. All the plans proposed by consultants and defended by the cities currently show an extension of the city street grid into the redeveloped villages and the implementation of buildings that are seen as the missing pieces of the large compositions of the urban plan. Bustling local streets are replaced with the quiet, formal gardens of gated communities or vast, landscaped plazas around office blocks. The clan temples, if they are retained, are typically displaced to a location that allows the regular and
standardized completion of the rest. In anticipation of government desires to sweep away any reminders of village occupancy, and in the hope that the compensation package will be even richer, some villages have undertaken the demolition of their own temples. So far, cities have focused on a relatively small number of centrally located villages in the larger cities. The costs associated with a single village replacement vastly exceed those of conventional development such that other approaches will be necessary for the vast majority of urban village replacement projects. Even if cities abandoned their obsessive drive to cloak the city with the trappings of modernity, there remains the problem of two fundamentally different land regimes co-existing uneasily in urban space. Just as that dichotomy drove the first wave of redevelopment, so it greatly influences the next.

Reference

Twentieth International Seminar on Urban Form

ISUF 2013 will take place in Brisbane, Australia from 17 to 20 July 2013. It will be hosted by Queensland University of Technology at the School of Design, Gardens Point Campus, Brisbane. The theme of the conference is ‘Urban form at the edge’. Topics to be covered include:

- Cities on the edge – cities in edge conditions, such as at natural limits and political boundaries
- Off centre – urban form in emerging economies and post-colonial countries
- On the edge of the city – peripheral areas and urban form in suburbia
- Edge cities – new urban conditions
- Regional centres – towns and cities with local importance, but at the edge of national or regional urban networks
- Pushing the edge – new technologies and new techniques

The organizers and the Council of ISUF invite participation in the conference by interested academics and professionals. The conference will take advantage of its relative proximity to Africa, India and South-East Asia by giving especial attention to these areas, directly addressing the challenge to ISUF to develop its presence more fully than hitherto in these parts of the world.

The region of south-east Queensland incorporates both Brisbane and its neighbour the Gold Coast City and is the fastest growing metropolitan region in Australia. The rapid processes of urban transformation have brought challenges comparable to those faced by many developing countries.

Pre-conference excursions will take place in Brisbane and post-conference excursions will take place in Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland.

The conference organizing committee comprises Professor Paul Sanders (Queensland University of Technology), Dr Kai Gu (University of Auckland), Dr Mirko Guaralda (Queensland University of Technology) and Professor Tony Hall (Griffith University). A conference website will be launched shortly. Enquiries and suggestions concerning the conference should be forwarded to Professor Sanders (e-mail: ps.sanders@qut.edu.au).