



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Streets and patterns** by *Stephen Marshall*, Spon, London, UK, 2005, 318 pp. ISBN 0-415-31750-9

This book is a densely-written and profusely-illustrated exploration of streets (of all types from motorways to alleys), their patterns, and their impact on urban form. The underpinning philosophy is a desire to understand how these street patterns could contribute to better urban design, building from the argument that there is a mismatch between the recent urban design-led agenda promoting mixed-use street grids and the conventional modernist hierarchical approach to streets and land-use zones. Hence we have produced some individually well-designed areas – at least according to contemporary wisdom – but they are often poorly-connected to wider networks of movement. The author comments that he hopes to review some of the ‘unchallenged truths’ seen in many texts on urbanism; to explore the ambiguities and contradictions between form and function, and to provide ‘something more than a facelift for design guidance’. This is very welcome. Why do some concepts become unchallenged, or even unchallengeable? Is it merely the influence of dominant paradigms and famous names – and, after all, the book begins with the futuristic modernism of Buchanan’s *Traffic in towns* (1963) and its proposed and uncompromising transformation of Bloomsbury.

To fulfil this challenging ambition means revisiting some abstract and technical issues ranging from graph theory to road hierarchies. The book itself has two main strands: ‘the design debate’, seen in Chapter 2’s review of literature and concepts of how the roles of streets could be reconciled, what patterns are felt to be desirable, and how more functional urban layouts could be designed around these more favourable patterns. These issues resurface in the last three chapters (8-10), which cover street systems, the generation of street patterns, and how these can inform good

practice in urbanism.

The second strand is a detailed investigation of ‘structure’, and occupies the central five chapters. It includes examination of the nature of structure, and how it may be represented and analysed through various approaches. Chapter 7 draws these ideas together to present a single conceptual framework. Theory is then applied to the ‘design debate’ in Chapters 8-10.

The conclusion is that fixed ideas and unchallenged truths need to be unfixed and challenged. There is more than one kind of hierarchy or grid that could deliver desired patterns and outcomes. They could – what a radical suggestion – even be combined: they are not mutually exclusive, and it is quite conceivable that an ‘arterial connector boulevard’ street type or a ‘dendritic tartan gridiron’ street pattern could function well. But would the complexity of professions and people involved in decision-making at the level of street network creation actually employ these radical ideas? Marshall’s suggestion is a form of design code, a ‘transport code’, rather than a simplistic design guide based on a set and limited street typology. Such a code could cover route type, necessary connections, permissible connections, and connection types.

The illustrations are usually very useful, even the small and simple marginal sketches. Most are clearly reproduced, although some have been scanned and have not reproduced particularly well. Some are surprising and thought-provoking, such as the magnified spider’s web chapter head graphic, where nodes are emphasized by drops of ‘glue’. The comparison of 60 street patterns, in what is admitted to be an ‘eclectic – even idiosyncratic’ selection, is also fascinating. That these were not reproduced at a constant scale was infuriating for a geographer but is, of course, irrelevant to the network analysis for which they are used.

This is a thoroughly-researched book. The text and illustrations are copiously footnoted, the notes being both references and additional comments.

The citations draw on a very broad literature, and it is interesting to see the types of links being made here. The literature has been thoroughly digested, as is shown particularly in the appendices detailing the sources of particular concepts and oft-repeated quotations or concepts (e.g. Appendix 2 for a range of 'desired patterns and properties'). In several cases these are welcome expansions of ideas represented as tables or illustrations within the main text. It is unusual to see so much explicit comparison of the ideas contained in so many citations. Yet all of this does lead to a very dense, complex text.

I read the book with the benefit of some knowledge of urban form, but having given little thought to the complexities of streets *per se*. For me, this was an extremely informative and helpful book. It explains some of the basics of network types and means of analysis, and explores the consequences of different street and network types for urban form and design. It could, perhaps, have been strengthened through greater use of non-UK examples; and perhaps the complexity of ideas and categories could be more clearly communicated through case studies. How is the author's suggested code to be implemented in the complex reality of contemporary urban form? This book is fascinating at the intellectual, academic, level. But I doubt that it will convince many practitioners – highway engineers, planners and designers – and this is a real missed opportunity.

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**London: a life in maps** by Peter Whitfield, British Library, London, UK, 2006, 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-7123-4919.

In *London: a life in maps* Peter Whitfield, former director of Stanford's International Map Centre, traces the morphological evolution of London through the lens of a corpus of cartographic pieces dating from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the last century. Split into four sections, 'London before the fire', 'The age of elegance', 'The Victorian metropolis', and 'The shock of the new', some of which contain up to twenty short subsections, this book gives a fascinating insight into features of spatial transformation within

England's capital city, and the political, commercial, cultural and aesthetic agents promoting change over continuity.

Opening with an informative glimpse of London prior to the Great Fire of 1666, an event shown to have hastened the evolution of cartography in England due to the post-disaster need for scaled maps rather than evocative illustrations (p. 55), the first section of the book reveals, amongst other things, the nature and significance of the earliest comprehensive images of the city. Noting how the first city-wide images of London coincided with the onset of a phase of urbanization that was to last for over 400 years (p. 9), Whitfield outlines the settlement's westward spatial migration and the foundation of physical changes (p. 12) that subsequently included the laying out of London's first planned residential square, Covent Garden, the architectural and spatial antecedent of the development of West London in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Taking post-restoration and Georgian London as its subject, 'The age of elegance' appraises the triumph of private (aristocratic) initiative, money and taste (p. 56) in the layout of London. There is a focus on the unfolding patterns of squares and streets in the West End, thoroughfares wide enough to accommodate wheeled transport – a distinctive indicator of class status (p. 59). Especial attention is given to the growth and form of districts such as Mayfair, St James's, Vauxhall, Soho, and Kensington. However, as Whitfield demonstrates, the Georgian period was not only characterized by the arranging of exclusive suburban estates. Hence attention is given to the often overlooked growth of Whitechapel (pp. 80-1). Highlighting matters such as increasing maritime activity, post-reformation society's lenience towards foreigners, and the city's intolerance of particular industries, namely those that had an unpleasant effect upon polite society's ears and nose, Whitfield describes how these and other factors encouraged the distinct character of East London to be established some 100 years prior to the commencement of the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, London's unique socio-morphological configuration is unravelled and shown to comprise contrasting East and West Ends, between which was sandwiched the City whose financial mechanisms underpinned both worlds.

By the third section, 'The Victorian metropolis', matters such as London's immense demographic surge, poverty's comprehensive presence, and the pursuit of wealth (p. 107) are brought to the fore. Expounding the struggles of the city's authorities to deal with growing social and environmental

predicaments, *London: a life in maps* nonetheless reveals the ability of architects, such as John Nash and Charles Barry, and master builders, such as Thomas Cubitt and James Burton, to transform the appearance of the city. Reflecting on matters of challenge to London society, the section on 'The Victorian metropolis' efficiently elicits the intermittent sense of crisis amongst the city's numerous public authorities in their improvement endeavours. The extent of the challenge reflects in part the fact that the city was never subject in previous times to a comprehensive plan (p. 115), notwithstanding Wren's proposed, but not implemented, city scheme following the Great Fire. Consideration is given to a variety of factors affecting nineteenth-century London's social and urban form. These included trains as a mediator of slum clearing due to 'rail land hunger', suburbanization associated with Acts to reduce fares for the labouring population (pp. 132-3), aesthetic fashions (pp. 138-44), the creation of cemeteries (pp. 144-7), the arranging of parks (pp. 148-9), the design of prisons (pp. 150-1), and the laying out of new roads like the Thames Embankment (p. 153), which were high-water marks of the metropolis's growing aspirations, self-confidence, and efforts to present itself as a worthy centre of nation and empire.

In the final section, 'The shock of the new', the twentieth-century's physical and social attacks on the city are spelled out. In addition to detailing the unrelenting suburban expansion of London, Whitfield describes the redevelopment of the urban core, for example after 1945 when architectural modernism and regional planning were embraced as part of the city's redefining of its image (p. 177). Highlighting many subjects previously examined, like architectural fashions, expositions, transportation, dockland expansion and objections to planning orthodoxies, this concluding section also clarifies the injurious role of the London County Council, British urban planners and German bombs, for as Whitfield makes clear the assault on London came from both endogenous and exogenous sources.

*London: a life in maps* is an interesting and important contribution to a hitherto somewhat neglected subject: the biography of urban transformation in cartographic form. Though not written specifically for urban morphologists, for no mention is made of prominent proponents, theories and methodologies, the book nonetheless successfully bridges the genres of morphological survey, urban history and mapping. It underlies the Conzenian observation of the value of town plans to historians. With its rich illustrations and insights

into the diversity of life and spatial transformation of London in the past 450 or so years, Whitfield should be praised for an erudite contribution – an exposé of the value of maps as historical documents, as sources of information, and as a means to investigate urban form. Although extremely fragmented owing to its many subsections, most of which are just two pages in length (including diagrams), and lacking in concluding comments to each of the four principal sections, *London: a life in maps* nevertheless provides a superb introduction to the notion of spatial continuity and change, and the abundance of factors that affect aesthetic and morphological expressions in a place, in this instance London. For scholars wishing to enlighten students about such matters, to shed light on the structure of cities and processes of intra-urban evolution, or to explain how the urban fabric develops its own distinct features within different historical epochs, then this book is an excellent starting point.

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**The practice of modernism: modern architects and urban transformation, 1954-1972** by *J. R. Gold*, Routledge, London, UK, 2007, 352 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-25843-2

Published in 1997, John Gold's *The experience of modernism* was a major contribution to our understanding of the history of Modern Movement architecture. Focusing on the future visions of modern architects, the book drew on a vast range of primary analysis, including unpublished documentation and personal interviews with architects. *The experience of modernism* sought to capture the feeling of the time, exploring 'the fascination that modernism had for its advocates as well as identifying elements that later represented its pitfalls' (Gold, 1997, p. xi). In doing so, Gold highlighted the complexity and contingency that underpins the 'grand narratives' of modernist history. The book was also a passionate defence of aspects of architectural modernism in the face of powerful narratives of modernist failure.

*The experience of modernism* covered the period from 1928 to 1953. The cut-off point was the

discontent that surfaced at CIAM IX, but 1953 was also a key moment of change for British urbanism in terms of economic recovery and increased resources for investment in housing and reconstruction. The visionary ideals of the previous era were about to be absorbed into the mainstream of reconstruction. *The practice of modernism* takes up that story. Whereas the first book had concentrated on future visions, *The practice of modernism* 'explores what happens when those ideas come to influence practice' (p. xiv). It covers a period that starts with expectation and enthusiasm for future possibilities, but ends with almost blanket condemnation of post-war modernism – and the architectural profession as a whole – in the 1970s. As Gold points out, 'to say the least, it was a most remarkable reversal of fortunes in such a short period of time' (p. 12).

*The practice of modernism* has a broadly chronological structure based around three main thematic parts. The first explores the careers of British modernist architects and their professional environments. The opening chapters cover issues such as training, career choices and the working environment of public and private sector architects in the 1950s. Chapter 4 also offers a fascinating insight into the relationships (and rivalries) between architecture, planning and engineering. The author demonstrates, for example, how the traditional, élitist role of architects was challenged by a range of social and technological changes, including planning for the car and innovations in standardized building. Whilst the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act gave greater prominence to planning as a profession, the main rivalry was with engineers who nurtured their own radical traditions and 'were fully capable of looking after their own interests' (p. 67). The impact of inter-professional rivalries on the ground is explored through case-studies of Liverpool, Birmingham and London.

The second, and longest, part of the book consists of five chapters that range across key aspects of reconstruction and development, notably central area redevelopment, New Towns and social housing. The New Towns discussion (Chapter 7) concentrates on the central area of Cumbernauld and its impact on the London County Council's unrealized plans for Hook (Hampshire). However, it is the subsequent analysis of social housing that stands out as the pivotal section of the book. Chapter 8, 'the pursuit of numbers', examines state pressures for increased levels of housebuilding in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrating how commercial pressures and the national target and subsidy regime encouraged experimentation with

high-rise flats and industrialized building methods at local level. The chapter concludes with a trenchant critique of the failures of 'no frills' industrialized housing and the culture of target-led housebuilding. These failures include a lack of funding for infrastructure and the cutting of costs on public spaces. Whereas Chapter 8 charts the devaluation of elements of the modernist vision, its companion chapter explores what happened when modernist architects were able to pursue their commitment to deliver a better society through social housing. Examples such as Lasdun's 'cluster blocks' and 'streets in the sky' schemes (Park Hill, Robin Hood Gardens), are placed in the context of sociological debate about the values of traditional housing forms.

The concluding part of the book explores the increasing diversity of architectural modernism in the 1960s. Chapter 10 pursues the earlier book's interest in movements, tracing the disbandment of MARS and CIAM, and the work of Team X. Tying up loose ends in the story of post-war modernism, the following chapter covers 'the continuing freewheeling progress of modernist thought in the 1960s' (p. 248), focusing particularly on conceptual experimentation with ideas of linear cities and megastructures. The concluding chapter details the beginnings of the anti-modernist backlash. Part of this is about the well-known story of the partial collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in May 1968, but Gold also traces the important role of the professional and academic critique of post-war modernist social housing in the *Architectural Review's* 'Housing Issue' of November 1967. The story post-1972 is to be taken up in a third book.

As with its predecessor, *The practice of modernism* demonstrates the value of primary research. More than 50 interviews were undertaken with key architects of the day, and their contribution is reflected in a series of anecdotal asides that bring the period to life. There are numerous examples, but one of my favourites is the insight that better students at the Regent Street Polytechnic in the 1950s were allowed to design on larger sheets of paper commensurate with their status. *The practice of modernism* is a pleasure to read. The conceptual themes of the earlier book are retained and extended, notably Gold's sensitivity to the complexities of Modern Movement history. However, as Gold acknowledges, the period from 1954 onwards takes that history into distinctively different territory. Whereas the previous era had been mainly about visions and propaganda, in the post-1954 period modernist architecture moved to mainstream practice; or, as Gold puts it, this was an

era when Modern Movement ideas would be held to account. One of the strengths of the book is the way that Gold unpacks the various forces that combined to undermine aspects of the modernist vision, notably the emphasis on meeting targets and the political turn to industrialized methods in social housing. But Gold is no apologist for modernist architects. Chapter 9 is critical of the limited social understanding of certain modernist architects involved in social housing projects, pointing to the bolt-on and shifting sociological justifications for projects such as Keeling House (p. 217). The author is similarly unforgiving of the indulgence of aspects of pie-in-the-sky-experimental thinking from the 1960s.

*The practice of modernism* deserves to be read widely. For those without a significant knowledge of the period, the book offers a solid grounding in the significant events, debates and developments of the period. Most of the major developments are covered through case-studies of notable projects and places, and the reader is guided clearly through the text. Moreover, with its wealth of observation and detail, this book is a good read in its own right. It is certainly sufficiently accessible to appeal to anyone with a passing interest in architecture and planning. And yet the quality of the scholarship

and Gold's eye for detail means that the book opens up new perspectives for serious scholars of modernist planning and architecture and post-war urbanism. *The practice of modernism* would be on my recommended reading list for built environment students at all levels of study, simply because it will lead to a better understanding of what happened and why in the 1950s and 1960s. The author does not labour the point, but there are some prescient lessons for what is happening in the current target-driven context for housing development. As with its predecessor, I will keep returning to *The practice of modernism* for fresh insights.

### Reference

Gold, J. R. (1997) *The experience of modernism: modern architects and the future city 1928-1953* (Spon, London).

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## ***Buildings & Landscapes: call for articles***

The scholarly refereed journal *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* spans a wide range of topics – from commercial buildings in American Chinatowns to seasonal communities in Idaho, from linoleum flooring in middle-class kitchens to garrets housing urban slaves, from farmsteads to urban tenements, vernacular architecture and its settings shape everyday life. Charged with dense cultural meanings that speak to both makers and users, buildings and landscapes reflect behaviour, shape identity, orchestrate ritual, and negotiate social relationships.

The editors of the journal invite submissions of articles. The subject matter covered by the journal includes all aspects of vernacular architecture and everyday urban and rural landscapes seen through interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methods. The submission of articles on topics within and beyond North America is encouraged. There is a particular interest in incorporating field work as a component of research.

*Buildings & Landscapes* has recently changed

from a biennial volume to an annual journal, and will become biannual in 2009. It is not necessary for articles to have been presented at annual meetings of the Vernacular Architecture Forum. All scholars in the field are eligible to submit manuscripts.

Manuscripts should conform to the Chicago Manual of Style. Contributors agree that manuscripts submitted to *Buildings & Landscapes* will not be submitted for publication elsewhere while under review by the journal. Two hard copies of the manuscript and photocopied reproductions of the illustrations should be sent directly to each of the two editors. Enquiries should be directed to one of the co-editors. The co-editors are: Howard Davis, Professor of Architecture, School of Architecture and Allied Arts, 1206 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403-1206, USA (E-mail: hdavis@uoregon.edu) and Louis P. Nelson, Assistant Professor of Architectural History, School of Architecture, Campbell Hall, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4122, USA (E-mail: Lnelson@virginia.edu).

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