

The study of urban form in Ireland

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Abstract. *Urban form is studied in a variety of disciplines in Ireland, but it has not, until recently, been central to urban studies. Histories of individual towns have usually been preoccupied with political, socio-economic and cultural issues. Archaeological excavations have made an important contribution to the reconstruction of Viking and Anglo-Norman towns. Map evidence is good for early-modern plantation towns. The Irish historic towns atlas provides detailed cartographic and topographical information for a growing number of towns within a chronological and thematic framework. Urban form is often considered as a container for socio-economic processes or as a marker in the search for cultural identity. Architectural studies have focused by and large on buildings of importance. While no Irish scholar has in a strict sense adopted Conzen's method of town-plan analysis, there is evidence for the emergence of a new focus on the fabric of the urban area rather than on the special event represented by the particular building. The 'cultural turn' in the social sciences has favoured discussions on town plans as ideological constructs and on the importance of urban space for civic society. There appears to be an increasingly strong morphological perspective in urban studies which is likely to be a reaction to the loss of historical fabric in the context of large-scale urban renewal schemes.*

Key Words: urban form, plots, building fabric, plan analysis, Irish historic towns atlas, urban conservation, building typology

As in so many countries, in Ireland research on urban form is undertaken within a number of disciplines, particularly architecture, geography and archaeology. In none of them, however, is it a central concern. Indeed, until fairly recently, the study of Irish urbanism had not received the attention it deserved. There is an important historical context to this, and any assessment of research on urban form needs to be made in the context of both Irish history

and the historical development of relevant academic disciplines in Ireland.

Historical context

The formation of the Irish urban system is historically closely connected to colonization movements, including the Viking and Anglo-Norman invasions and the English reconquest

in early-modern times (Simms, 1995). Indeed it might be argued that the prominence of the struggle for independence and the forging of cultural identity has been a factor contributing to the relative lack of attention that has been accorded to the development of urban centres until recent decades.

The first chair-holders in geography, E. E. Evans (1945-68) in Belfast and T. Jones Hughes in Dublin (1960-87), were pre-occupied with the Irish rural landscape, relating to its material culture and cultural context respectively. The generation of geographers that descended from the founding fathers continued this tradition (Simms, 2000). In the Donegal volume published in 1995 as part of the series on the history and society of Ireland, Crawford's essay on the evolution of the urban network in the county is the only contribution on towns in this volume of 28 chapters.

According to Andrews (1995), modern topographical literature in Ireland began in the 1570s with the writings of Stanihurst. In 1586 Irish towns got good coverage in Camden's *Britannia*. The emphasis on civic virtues encouraged urban scholarship. In the sixteenth century many descriptions of towns started with laments over the destruction of towns as the result of confrontation between the Gaelic Irish and the colonial power. Irish towns recovered only in the seventeenth century, particularly those with a strong planter influence. These are the ones with local histories.

The story of many small towns is contained in county histories. Here the focus is on the uniqueness of spaces and Andrews (1995) points out that it is because of this attitude that there are few pictures showing the townscape as a whole rather than just individual buildings. Samuel Lewis's *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* published in 1837 contains excellent coverage of Irish towns, but has no town plans.

Camblin's (1951) book *The town in Ulster*, showing large-scale Ordnance Survey maps and plantation maps of towns in Northern Ireland, was a treasure in its time, because it was the only one of its kind. The otherwise

useful book on the town in Ireland, edited by the historians Harkness and O'Dowd (1981), did not contain a single map: nor did Daly's (1985) book on *Dublin: the deposed capital*. In this respect the volume edited by the geographer Butlin (1977) on *The development of the Irish town* had been more successful, containing a number of town plans.

The earliest work to use the concept of urban morphology in an Irish context was the thesis by Burke (1972) on 'Dublin 1600-1800: a study in urban morphogenesis'. Unfortunately it has remained unpublished. It focuses on urban form as such and on 'the causal chain in the process of city-building'. Drawing on primary source material she established a chronological structure within which the 'growth determinants' and 'morphogenetic agents' that shaped the urban landscape of the city could be identified. Her work is placed explicitly within Conzen's understanding of urban morphology (Conzen, 1960). Her thesis is cited in research studies in architecture that are concerned with linking urban form to building type.

Archaeologists, such as Wallace (1986), have made an important contribution towards understanding the form of the early-medieval town in Ireland. Wallace (1992) has written an essay in which he focuses on the similarity in form between the Viking towns of Ireland, mainly Dublin and Waterford, for which the archaeological record is best. Wallace (1986, 2004, p. 32) has suggested how early-medieval towns should be mapped keeping rigidly to the archaeological record. Only then would he agree to comparisons with later cartographic presentations. He wrote: 'ultimately it should and hopefully will be possible to use the latest of the archaeologically derived maps with the earliest of the contemporary maps of Dublin to form a continuous sequence, mapping the evolution of the town from its mid-ninth century inception to the time of John Rocque and beyond'. In the same article Wallace wrote that urbanism took root in Dublin before the end of the ninth century, reflected in fenced properties and plots. It is the focus on the importance of the early property boundaries, the plot patterns of any given

town, which brings the archaeologist and the historical geographer together. In contrast, the medieval historian Clarke (1998, p. 365) warns that house plots standing side by side cannot be used as a sole criterion for urban form, as other factors, for example royal patronage, often played a more important role. Simpson's (2000) rescue excavations in Dublin and her summary of all excavation sites is very important in order to achieve the bigger picture of the topographical spread of medieval Dublin.

Clarke (1977) has reconstructed the basic topography of early medieval Dublin from information gleaned from contemporary documents. In his towns' atlas fascicle on Dublin (Simms *et al.*, 1986-) he has merged the archival information with the topographical information available from the first extant map, Speed's map of 1610. The medieval historian/archaeologist Bradley (1985, 1990, 2004) has written on the role of town-plan analysis in the study of medieval Irish towns and specifically on planned Anglo-Norman towns in Ireland. The historical geographer Simms (1979, 1992, 2001) has traced the growth of the medieval city of Dublin by using plan analysis based on Rocque's map of 1756, the first to show accurately surveyed property boundaries. She has also attempted to relate the mode of origin of medieval towns to the formation of their historical cores.

The Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement published a volume on settlement history in Ireland, edited by the medieval historian Barry (2000). Only two of ten chapters in the book were directly concerned with an urban topic. These were the contribution by Graham (2000) on 'Urbanisation in Ireland during the High Middle Ages c. 1100 to c. 1350', which was more geared towards the processes of urbanization than towards urban form, and the chapter by Andrews (2000) on 'Plantation Ireland: a review of settlement history', which provided maps of plantation towns. Loeber (1991) in his study of the English colonization of Ireland made good use of town plans and Graham and Proudfoot (1992) explored *Urban improvement in provincial Ireland, 1700-1840*. Proud-

foot (1995) also published a major monograph on urban patronage and social authority and a shorter contribution on landlord, planning and urban growth in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Ireland (Proudfoot, 1997).

A number of publications deal with the historical development of Dublin in a strong spatial context. These include the book by Prunty (1997) on slums, which contains a large number of extracts from Ordnance Survey town plans at various scales which demonstrate the location of poor housing in nineteenth-century Dublin. Sheridan-Quantz (2001) reconstructed eighteenth-century Dublin by plotting information from primary sources in the archives on an Ordnance Survey base map. This work is contained in the first of two volumes on the comparative study of English and Irish towns published by the British Academy. On the whole these volumes deal with towns mainly as containers of historical developments. The first on 'London and Dublin 1500-1840' was edited by Clark and Gillespie (2001) and the second on 'Provincial towns in early modern England and Ireland' was edited by Borsay and Proudfoot (2002). There have been detailed studies on individual Irish towns, for example on Dublin (Maclaran, 1993) and Limerick (Hill, 1991), but also on smaller towns such as Tullamore (Byrne, 1998), Lurgan (McCory, 1993), Athlone (Murtagh, 2000) and New Birmingham (Nolan, 2004), but all of these are primarily focused on socio-economic history and not on morphology. A particularly good example of this socio-economic approach is Gulliver and Silverman's (1995) historical anthropology of an Irish market town. There are also studies of individual maps of Irish towns where the interest is as much on the map as it is on the town (Andrews, 1983; Horner, 1978).

The opposite is true of the *Irish historic towns atlas*. This project, which has covered 17 towns to date, aims to analyse the form of Irish towns based on large-scale town plans. Edited currently by Simms, Clarke and Gillespie, with Andrews as consultant editor, it is part of a European project, based on the unifying scale of 1:2500 (Simms *et al.*, 1986-).

The challenge it provides for comparative studies was the motivation for a conference that was held in Dublin in 2006, attended by the editors of European towns-atlases. The papers presented at this conference are being prepared for publication by Ashgate in 2009. The Irish atlas contains coloured topographical maps that show the physical growth of specific towns. Some authors deconstruct the large-scale town plans, while others treat the large-scale map as an illustration rather than an analytical tool. The potential for urban studies of the maps and topographical information contained in the *Irish historic towns atlas* has been explored by Bradley (2004).

In 1993 Radio Telefis Éireann ran a series of radio lectures on smaller Irish towns and cities, which were subsequently published. The first two series on country towns were edited by Simms and Andrews (1994, 1995) and the third one on cities by Clarke (1995). Each essay in those three volumes includes a generalized town plan.

The first volume in a series focusing on the urban form of Dublin, edited by Brady and Simms, appeared under the title *Dublin through space and time* (2001), to be followed by McManus (2002) on *Dublin, 1910-1940: shaping the city and suburbs*, Boyd (2006) on *Dublin, 1745-1922* and Moore (2007) on *Reinventing Dublin's docklands* (2007). In the last two volumes urban morphology provides a framework for discussion, but the emphasis lies in the critical analysis of forces in society that created certain urban forms. The same is true of the essay by Strohmayer (2007) on how the loss of public spaces in Galway in favour of private exploitation resulted in a local civil society frozen in a spaceless mode.

The history of the built form of Irish towns

For the most part, the history of the built form of Irish towns and cities is found in texts written with a focus on buildings of architectural and historical importance. In classic works, such as those by Craig (1952) and Casey (2005), the city is portrayed in terms of its key buildings. In contrast, McCullough

(1989, 2007) views the architecture of Dublin as part of the urban fabric rather than as expressed as a series of special events. He shows that Dublin's Georgian city was not designed as a coherent whole but as a patchwork of set pieces defined by property boundaries. The aesthetic unity of eighteenth century Dublin was achieved because a particular architectural type and its variants were accepted. McCullough discusses building typology and provides evidence on house form and construction. This type of work follows a typological approach to building form and is concerned to make explicit the relationship between urban form and urban design. Hill's (1991) book on Limerick belongs to the same category. McCullough's aspiration is that his book (McCullough, 1986, 2007) will inform the debate about future directions in urban design and act as a resource for developments within the city. Historical studies in architecture have also extended into the examination of the role of agents in determining urban form, notably the work of McParland (1972) on Wide Streets Commissioners in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dublin.

The architectural concern with urban and building form is ultimately rooted in the desire to influence contemporary intervention. While this concern has had a long history in architecture, it re-emerged in a variety of forms with the weakening of modernist approaches to planning and design in the aftermath of the Second World War. The work of theorists such as Colin Rowe, Aldo Rossi and the Krier brothers and the experience of urban regeneration in cities such as Bologna contributed, on the basis of typological studies and contextualisation, to a more sophisticated understanding of urban fabric. The typological strand has been a constant, whether orientated towards intervention (deBlacam and Kealy, 1975), the creation of a record (Kealy, 1966; Kealy and O'Rourke, 1996) or, as mentioned above, as an element in the history of urban form (Hill, 1991; McCullough, 1989, 2007). The series of studies of individual Dublin streets, based on historical maps, published by the Dublin Civic Trust can be

taken as evidence that a distinct way of understanding the built form of cities has developed in parallel to the established focus on discrete buildings (Craig, 1999; Henderson, 2001; James, 2001). In the 1990s a series of inventories of Dublin's urban fabric was carried out in the School of Architecture in University College Dublin, which became known as the Built Environment Survey of the Dublin Environmental Inventory (DEI). The methodology of these surveys was influenced by Conzen's division of the urban fabric into plots, streets and plan forms. The methodology that was finally adopted for the DEI also owed much to the approach recommended in Bologna where building typology was related to the analysis of the role of economics in the historical evolution of the city (Bandarin, 1979).

A particular theoretical perspective to the topic of urban morphology and urban design was generated through the collaboration of the Departments of Architecture and Geography in University College Dublin in developing a taught postgraduate programme on the built form of Western cities. The course introduced Conzen's ideas of town-plan analysis and is intended to provide a bridge between urban morphology and urban design.

Architectural research into Dublin's urban structure generated a series of academic theses, five of which were recently edited by Clark and Smeaton (2006) and published in book form.

From urban form to urban landscape: a paradigm shift?

The shift in focus from urban form to urban landscape was encouraged by the so-called 'cultural turn' in the social sciences. During the 1980s young Irish geographers began to look at the meaning of changes in the layout of town plans and of the townscape in general. They consider the urban landscape as an ideological construction. These ideas have crossed interdisciplinary boundaries. Instead of thinking in categories of form the interest is focused on consumption, spectacle, perform-

ance and the culture of past societies with reference to the present.

Whelan (2004) considers the streetscape, iconography and the politics of identity in post-colonial Dublin in an attempt to explore the symbolic use of public space in a capital city. In a similar way archaeologists have tried to counter the tendency to focus on the individual buildings rather than their urban context; for example by placing stylistic and aesthetic concerns within broader cultural contexts. O'Keefe and Yamin (2006) set the historiography of urban historical archaeology within its wider cross-disciplinary context and, by way of case-studies drawn from New York and Philadelphia, illustrate how historical archaeologists study streetscapes, buildings and backyards. But they also stress how important it is for urban historical archaeologists to think beyond the categories of style, structure, form, sequence and function as applied by traditional archaeology. They see towns as places of opportunity as well as oppression. They look upon town plans as indicators of former spectacle and performance. Their focus of interest has shifted from looking at the constituent elements of urban morphology to revealing the culture of people who lived in a specific town and connecting them to the present. In sympathy with this, Lilley (2004a, b) seeks to reveal the medieval city from a medieval point of view. He builds on his empirical study of mapping medieval landscapes using GIS and GPS, but goes on to look at the symbolism that urban forms represented in the medieval imagination. He believes that this aspect influenced the formation of the built space in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

It is likely that the development of a morphological perspective in Irish urban studies from the 1970s onwards owes a great deal to an emerging sense that the quality of cities and towns in Ireland was about to be lost in the development boom of the late 1960s. The controversy over the Viking excavations

at Wood Quay, in which the city authorities supported the destruction of the archaeology of the earliest traces of Dublin, left an enduring legacy. The publication of *Dublin: a city in crisis* (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, 1975) can be seen in this light, although most of the contributions refer to future intervention rather than to the study of existing form. There has been a degree of cross-fertilization between different disciplines in the study of urban form, in particular between architecture and geography. The potential for collaboration between architects and planners remains untapped. The scarcity of morphological studies within the corpus of planning research is notable. Planning research in Dublin is largely focused on economic developments. A notable exception is Derry O'Connell's work on medium-sized towns in Ireland (O'Connell, 2006). Planning practice all over the country is dominated by local political circumstances. Its intellectual energies are directed towards issues of policy guidance, leaving the study of urban form to other disciplines.

Urban morphology has never been central to the research interests of Irish geographers. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why, in the writing of this article, co-operation between the disciplines of geography and architecture was attractive. For both of us urban form constituted an intellectual challenge as it is a physical manifestation of our culture, socio-economic organization and governance. The architects realize that the geographers apply another lens to look at urban form, using another type of vocabulary. As far as they are concerned, the morphological approach of the geographers provides a narrative that describes how urban form is tied together, based on the concept of plots, streets, blocks and ultimately plan units.

Likewise, town-plan analyses of Irish towns as well as of continental towns carried out by geographers is rooted in the belief that the structural elements that make up the European town – the plot pattern, street-system and plan units – bear comparison all over the continent. Within that framework different regions produce different urban landscapes depending

on their cultural and historical context. Urban form is a document that can be read. Both disciplines make use of the writings of theorists in order to explain the meaning of different urban landscapes. The issues of urban form in a never-ending process of development, continuity and change, tradition and innovation, justice and injustice, and historical knowledge as an operational tool are significant for both disciplines. The study of urban form has penetrated different fields of research in Ireland. The scene is much more diffuse than 20 years ago, because the younger generation has woven old threads of inquiry into new discourses. The study of urban form in Ireland is multifaceted. No one discipline owns the topic.

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This was the first ISUF conference to be held outside Europe and North America. It was also by far the largest ISUF conference to date. Out of 412 abstracts submitted by prospective speakers, 220 survived the vetting process and formed the basis for presentations at the conference. The number of participants, 310, was also a record, as was the number attending from countries as far away as China (14) and Russia (10). However, the Centro de Artes e Convenções da Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto and the local hotels were well able to cope with this influx of urban morphologists, provision for visitors in this rather remote town having been stimulated by its designation as a World Heritage Site in 1980. The Brazilian organizers of the conference, led by Staël de Alvarenga Pereira Costa (Universidade de Federal de Minas Gerais), are to be congratulated on their organization of this unexpectedly large and very productive event.

For those arriving in good time, a prelude to the conference was a walking tour of Ouro Preto led by June Komisar (Ryerson University) who has undertaken detailed research on the town over a number of years. Brought into existence by the discovery of gold at the end of the seventeenth century, the town now known as Ouro Preto developed as a series of hamlets located in relation to the veins of gold and connected by paths across the mountainous landscape. The gradual consolidation of these initial settlements, with their often prominent churches, and the planning in the early eighteenth century of a town centre (Figure 1) were

among the themes developed during the tour.

After the official opening of the conference, the paper sessions began with a keynote address by Ivor Samuels (University of Birmingham and Oxford Brookes University) on typomorphology and urban design practice. It was exemplified largely by work done in England, but the wide relevance of his argument was manifest. At its core was the application of the explanatory powers of urban morphology in planning practice. He argued that this is not only a matter of managing conservation and change in historical urban landscapes, but also of using the lessons learned from past landscapes to create new ones. In particular he argued for the much greater emphasis on enduring structures, such as the pattern of streets and plots, as distinct from the relatively ephemeral architectural superstructure. Major parts of Samuels's argument are developed elsewhere in this issue (pp. 58-62).

The ensuing proceedings that day and in the following two days covered a very wide range of topics, most of them dealt with in concurrent sessions of paper presentations. There were also five further plenary sessions and a New Researchers' Forum. The plenary sessions covered five themes: non-Western cities; urban morphology and computers; urban form and density; architecture and urban design restoration; and open spaces, squares, forms and landscape. As always, a good deal of fruitful discussion took place during informal exchanges during coffee breaks (Figure 2)
