

REVIEW ARTICLE

Reappraising the British townscape: heritage and urban form

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Adam Menuge (2008) *Ordinary landscapes, special places* (English Heritage, Swindon, UK, 94 pp. ISBN 978-1-873592-89-2).

Simon Taylor and Julian Holder (2008) *Manchester's northern quarter* (English Heritage, Swindon, UK, 86 pp. ISBN 978-1-873592-84-7).

Simon Taylor and Kathryn Gibson (2010) *Manningham: character and diversity in a Bradford suburb* (English Heritage, Swindon, UK, 108 pp. ISBN 978-1-84802-030-6).

Michael Rose with Keith Falconer and Julian Holder (2011) *Ancoats: cradle of industrialisation* (English Heritage, Swindon, UK, 98 pp. ISBN 978-1-84802-027-6).

The development of the English urban environment following the onset of the industrial revolution has been investigated by numerous academics working within various scholarly fields. Detailed surveys of England's post-industrial urban evolution have, for instance, been put forward by historians such as Philip Waller (1983), Tristram Hunt (2004), Richard Rodger (1989), Asa Briggs (1963), and Anthony Sutcliffe (1981) – a founder of the Planning History Society (now known as the International Planning History Society). Whilst not schooled in urban morphological theory and practice the contribution of such individuals has nonetheless been invaluable to comprehending the transformation of English urban form – for example, on micro-morphological matters such as housing structure and plot formation, during the industrial age. Such has been their intellectual impact that they have influenced a host of geographers, planners, and historians interested in environmental, legal, and cultural development. In view of the broad academic interest in England's urban past, in part due to the country's status as the world's first industrial and urban nation, much information presently exists about the character of buildings, spaces, and settlements in the nineteenth century. What can authors whose studies have been published by English Heritage add?

From 2000 onwards English Heritage has, through its Informed Conservation Series, been active in producing historical biographies of English provincial cities. By publishing texts on traditional market towns, for example Bridport and Berwick-upon-Tweed, seaside towns such as Margate and Weymouth, and large-sized industrial settlements, such as Birmingham, Gateshead, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield, English Heritage has played a valuable role in illuminating the richness of England's built past. It has informed people of historical design and planning contexts, and revealed how the English sense of place affected not only local, regional, and national identity, but also the design of buildings and environments. English Heritage has given those interested in historical environmental design a foundation to appreciate how certain built environments evolved during particular junctures in the past, and provided opportunity to comprehend what environments in previous eras meant to those who resided in them.

Historical buildings provide a tangible link to the past. This gives them great worth in their own right, although in prior decades the value of old edifices and environments has not always been viewed in such a positive manner. Since the Second World War British built heritage has frequently been thought of as an

impediment to urban change and renewal. As a result old buildings were often earmarked for demolition so as to allow for 'urban progress'. Today, however, urban planners and municipal authorities more openly recognize the positive contribution historical environments can make. Hence many local governments now seek to establish dynamic living environments through reviving rather than razing aged urban districts. A new range of urban conservation policies has become evident. Old industrial districts, for example, have become not only reappraised but also protected. The physical attributes of historical environments have consequently been widely acknowledged, and accordingly pioneer industrial areas such as Ancoats, a Manchester borough derided for much of the last century as a site of urban decay, have experienced a revival of interest in relation to their built heritage. English Heritage has been fundamental to this process through its investigations and subsequent publicizing of the special qualities of the old urban environments of England. As Baroness Andrews, chair of the organization remarked (Rose *et al.*, 2011, p. ix), English Heritage is committed to safeguarding Britain's built urban history. Books belonging to the Informed Conservation Series are vital to this course of action. Environments hitherto perceived as commonplace and uninspiring are now being perceived to be of national cultural significance, and to be crammed with distinct architectural and spatial features.

Urban transformation and housing

Laura Kolbe (2012) has noted that the greatest contribution that historical studies have made to city design knowledge-building has been the historian's curiosity in, and explanation of, urban transformation. To recognize this point is to open the door to appreciating first the standpoint from which the Informed Conservation Series has been composed, and secondly what this series can offer to the urban morphologist. Although the books are primarily architectural and historical assessments of built environments they also

comprise narratives of urban change. By presenting case studies of selected urban districts and in some instances entire settlements, the Series bestows a window through which to assess the features and evolution of particular urban places. This is not academically revolutionary. It has with reference to settlements such as Liverpool been undertaken by local historians (for example, David Lewis, 2010), social historians (for example, James Treble, 1971), journalists (for example, Stephen Bayley, 2010), architects and planners (for example, David Littlefield, 2009), and geographers (for example, Richard Lawton and Colin Pooley, 1975). But the work associated with English Heritage has through its strong attention to plots and typologies granted a fresh analytical perspective and shed new light. As a case in point, whilst the opulent, leafy suburbs of Victorian England have long attracted the notice of conservationists and historians, such as H. J. Dyos (1966), Donald Olsen (1982), David Cannadine (1980), and F. M. L. Thompson (1988), the 'ordinary suburbs', such as Anfield in Liverpool, have been somewhat overlooked. Far less, for example, is currently known of the factors that inspired the construction and design of Anfield in comparison to, say, salubrious Sefton Park. Likewise little is known of how Anfield contributed to the distinctive townscape of Liverpool. Hence the value of Adam Menuge's publication, *Ordinary landscapes, special places*. Furthermore, with reference to Ancoats in Manchester, the focus of Michael Rose's book, although much has been written of it as a site of urban deprivation, little detailed information exists of how the district's urban form developed, or the standards of construction for housing types composed at different times in the district's past. Whilst documentary evidence dating from the 1840s (for example, Friedrich Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England, 1845*) revealed marked disparities in social and housing standards within the area, it was not until 2007, as Rose observed, when archaeological excavations took place that architectural evidence was able to verify nineteenth-century

building descriptions of which contemporary historians had been hugely skeptical. For urban morphologists the findings of Manchester University's Archaeological Unit excavations are noteworthy. Early industrial housing has been shown to be grander in construction, layout, and provision of sanitary facilities than previously thought. Later houses were not only less well built, but were so densely packed together that party and gable walls were just one brick thick (Rose *et al.*, 2011, pp. 44-5). But why are such data on Ancoats's heritage important? As one of the world's first industrial areas, Ancoats has a unique place in industrial and urban history. So to understand how its environment developed is fundamental to appreciating the first urban industrial forms.

The industrial age has in England's cultural narrative been characterized as a time in which a major divide in wealth and living arrangements was formed between the social classes. This in particular has been shown in the writings of urban historians such as Anthony Wohl (2002), Jerry White (2007), Martin Daunton (1990), and Sarah Wise (2009). In urban morphological terms, however, it is important not to neglect the fact that housing supply for both rich and poor was largely determined by speculative building. As Dyos and Reeder (1973) explained in their Marxist-leaning paper 'Slums and suburbs', the investment of capital into property had a massive impact on how industrial urban form, and life within it, was shaped. The nature of financial investment, they argued, produced settlements that, contrary to their appearance, were not single, coherent built environments (p. 359) but were mosaics of numerous fragments of land that each had its own distinct functions, urban forms, and social traits. In such a context, cities evolved not only with areas devoted to particular land uses but also with numerous parcels of land containing distinct housing arrangements for particular social groups (Timms, 1971, pp. 54-9). As David Cannadine suggested in 'Victorian cities: how different?' (Cannadine, 1977, p. 457), the industrial age shifted the cultural, social, and economic dynamics of England,

and this transition led to a massive reordering and rebuilding of urban space. From the examination of Ancoats by Rose *et al.* (2011), it is evident that new types of worker housing emerged as a consequence of speculative builders responding to the widening of the local economy and employment structure. Furthermore, as Taylor and Holder (2010, p. 17) reveal in their account of Manchester's Northern Quarter at the time of industrial 'take off' in the 1780s, notable changes to the social and environmental fabric occurred: what was once a high-class residential area developed on a grid plan – a classically-inspired housing development of the type first seen in early-eighteenth century Bristol – was converted into an industrial hub with a seemingly disorderly environment. As part of this process warehouses were built alongside the Rochdale Canal (completed 1804), cheap housing was erected to satisfy the local demand for low and unskilled labourers, and extensions were added to the rear of Georgian houses as a means of coping with the enormous demand for housing – an effect of the working class needing to live near sources of employment due to work contracts commonly being of a weekly duration. By the late-1830s, when social and environmental problems were at their peak, wealthy citizens left the area so as to, on the one hand, avoid Manchester's deplorable living conditions and, on the other hand, exploit the new possibility for suburban living brought about by the development of transport technology. Yet, as Taylor and Holder emphasize, with the development of the train and the opening of the Oldham Road Station (in 1839) the Northern Quarter's status as an important industrial and business centre was further enforced, and was manifest by new building types in the district. Banks and commercial chambers for the first time appeared in the area, and with the construction of Piccadilly Station (opened 1842) more building types – for example hotels, public houses, eating establishments, and shops – were opened. At the same time, as part of this environmental transition, plots were amalgamated so that large buildings (warehouses, banks, and a market building) could be built

(p. 40). In this way not only did the appearance of the Northern Quarter change, but the nature of the new buildings began to define the quarter as Manchester's primary shopping and market area (pp. 55-65) – a legacy that persisted into the twentieth century.

Menuge's *Ordinary landscapes, special places* provides a great deal of information on the influence of speculative development on the creation of suburban housing layouts in Liverpool. Focusing on the Anfield district of the city, Menuge highlights how speculative housing evolved from grand detached villas to terraced housing. Explaining this in terms of the growing numbers of middle-class people in Liverpool, the downward social diffusion of suburban living as the nineteenth century unfolded, the expansion of house designs, and the growing influence of transport developments, he offers a detailed picture of why Anfield became so rooted in Liverpool's culture from the early-nineteenth century onward. Whereas H. J. Dyos (1982, p. 3) once remarked that in terms of the appearance of British settlements the Victorian era is virtually a thing of the past, Menuge discloses that in Liverpool historical suburbs still form an extensive element of the cityscape. Standing as testimony to past modes of life, suburbs need to be understood in terms of culture and their relationship to cities as a whole. He notes the importance of building names in the early phase of Anfield's construction (in the 1840s). This, he suggests, provided a sense of exclusivity for Liverpool's middle class. This sense of status was expressed in the names of new, grand detached houses set within large, landscaped plots. They were, we are told, frequently called 'lodges' as opposed to the more common label in England of 'villa': the term 'lodge' was used by the gentry for their second homes and articulated Liverpool's middle class yearning to demonstrate wealth and social status (Menuge, 2008, p. 16). In addition Menuge gives attention to structural features such as vertical elements on detached houses. Towers it seems were employed to enhance the scale of lodges which, when built on elevated sites, gave them added visibility throughout

suburban Liverpool. The local desire to reside in high status districts meant that house building broadened by the 1850s to include the construction of pairs of villas, built for those with social aspirations yet lacking in wealth to afford their own detached abode. In morphological terms Menuge reveals (pp. 22-3) that the development of plots and, for instance, the siting of double-villas was not arbitrary: plots were thin; the houses were positioned at a distance from the front of the plot so as to allow for an adequate front garden; double-villas were always situated at the fringes of suburban estates. In the following decades, as villa popularity rose to unprecedented heights, the compromising of the social standing of villas led to the investment of money into another house type: the large terraced house (of three storeys and a basement). Although terraced housing was not a new house type to Liverpool – this house type had first appeared in the city in the mid-eighteenth century – by the 1860s it became the house of choice amongst the lower middle class and the upper echelons of the white collar sector. In contrast to the dwellings of Liverpool's poor, who were in back-to-back houses in small streets (known as courts) in proximity to the port and factories, the substantial terraced houses inspired a change amongst landowners by the 1870s as to how they developed their land (p. 32). This radically affected the urban form of Liverpool. Landowners by the 1870s were no longer willing to sell their land for the purpose of constructing a single lodge. Instead land was now to be divided up into symmetrical plots, increasing housing density and the profitability of land without compromising the perceived high social standing of housing in the area. Under such conditions Robson Street (1870-3) and Sleeper's Hill (1873) were built. Unlike the terraced houses for the labouring classes the 'superior houses' were distinguished through their architectural elements: wide façades, bay windows and plots separated from the street by low walls.

On housing patterns and the influence of transport many detailed data have been provided by H. J. Dyos (1966, 1982), John Kellett (1969), and Jack Simmons (1991).

Transport, they contend, was central from the 1840s to changes in English urban form. In Manningham, a settlement that grew as an industrial suburb of Bradford, the development of transport between the 1840s and 1900 influenced major urban growth. Developed as Bradford's premier suburb (Taylor and Gibson, 2010, p. 25), Manningham developed in the 1800s with a mixture of industrial buildings, and rich- and poor-people's housing. As the second half of the nineteenth century unfolded not only were different densities of buildings to be found in Manningham, but a range of religious buildings and worker housing types emerged too. Akin to Anfield, the first detached suburban houses were indeed large, although three idiosyncrasies were evident in their siting and design: they were located to the east of Manningham's primary north-south artery, Manningham Lane; they were positioned well inside their plots so as to provide garden space in front of the houses; and the buildings, designed by local architects, were mostly in keeping with Bradford's architectural vernacular.

As was common elsewhere in Britain, speculative development was an integral part of Manningham. Central to this process was not just individual investment but the presence of building clubs (Taylor and Gibson, 2010, p. 36). Providing their members with money to build houses, this financial system had a considerable impact on Manningham's urban environment by enabling the lower social classes to buy houses freehold (Taylor and Gibson, 2010, p. 46). Freehold land societies influenced Manningham in two ways: workers' houses were of a higher quality than those constructed elsewhere in Bradford, and various types of terraced houses were built. For the affluent classes the finance system also affected how they lived. Investment in property led to a number of new streets being laid down. Sited initially west of Manningham Lane, numerous high status terraces were built between the 1840s and the 1860s some with distinct designs and plans: for example, at Hallfield Road a terrace was designed with an end to resemble a classical villa, and Hannover Square was shaped in a horseshoe form. Thus

Victorian Manningham should not just be read in its industrial landmarks, such as Lister Mills, or its renowned Victorian park, Lister Park, but through the richness of its housing. In the 1800s, contrary to the historical image of the suburb, different social groups albeit in different ways each left an indelible mark on Manningham's physical form. The established presence of a German Jewish community, for example, led to the building of Bradford's first synagogue in Manningham. As successful local merchants with their factories in the central 'Little Germany District', this group became central to the boom in villa buildings.

History, heritage and urban morphology

The diversity of buildings in English industrial settlements has produced environments with a typological breadth and visual richness that few European countries can match. While some of the building types, architectural forms, and urban layouts have over time become regarded as commonplace the Informed Conservation Series reveals that this observation is ill-informed: ordinary areas have unique stories to tell through their built forms. Furthermore, upon close inspection, the journey through England's industrial settlements reveals the value of appreciating local history. For example, knowledge of co-operative movement worker housing in Manningham is integral to understanding why housing in the settlement was of substantially higher standard than in other contemporary places. Likewise, appreciating history helps yield detailed insights into the contexts and processes that affected local urban design, and the impact of broader societal influences on the composition of urban environments in particular places. In broad terms, the Informed Conservation Series should thus not be viewed as intrinsically urban morphology books. They provide no direct reference to well-known morphological schools of thought, or theories on urban form. Yet they are undoubtedly of morphological relevance. They draw heavily on maps. As Menue (2008, pp. 81-2) has stated, if the task is to discover how an urban

place came into being, and what the chronology of development was, then maps provide high quality information.

Buildings, streets, and urban spaces irrespective of their date of construction embody evidence about the nature of society in the past. While some buildings and districts may be considered to be ordinary, an inspection of their architecture and urban forms can reveal the confidence and affluence of urban society in the past, and how the culture of the time imprinted itself on the quality and form of buildings. Furthermore, the adaptation of national styles to local needs gives the buildings and the cities in which they are sited a special character. As English Heritage's books demonstrate, environments are much more than collections of buildings arranged in particular spatial configurations. Buildings show local identities and culture through their distinct structural qualities (Rose *et al.*, 2011, p. 94). In highlighting the qualities of English environments the Informed Conservation Series has shown that cities not only had a history, but in historiographical terms these built histories inform the present and guide the future.

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