

A philosophical base for urban morphology

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Abstract. *An exploration of philosophy related to urban morphology examines some of the 'post-modern' pathways related to the rediscovery of the importance of place. The works of Foucault and Lefebvre are seen as the source of propositions that may be the essence of what urban morphology needs to focus on.*

Key Words: philosophy, place, Foucault, Lefebvre

Recent discussion concerning a philosophical base for urban morphology has had a certain poignancy (M.R.G. Conzen, 1998; Gerosa, 1999; Kropf, 1999). The reader is given, on the one hand, a somewhat retrograde aspect of purpose and methods, and on the other, a certain sense that further development of urban morphology requires sound philosophical foundations. While discussion of a philosophical base for urban morphology may initially appear somewhat arcane, it is posited in this paper that some metaphysical reflection may indeed have important pointers for urban morphology.

While not necessarily discounting the contribution of Cassirer, referred to by each of the authors cited above, the conceptual understanding of the built environment has moved focus a considerable distance from Cassirer's Kantian 'knowledge' of culture. At the time of Cassirer's death, in 1945, space was seen as emerging from locations, in a non-reciprocal process: place was no mere 'part' or 'portion' of space, as Locke, Newton, and Descartes had insisted, but the

relationship was the other way round (Casey 1997, p. 275). Cassirer worked within the ambit of Heidegger's influence, himself influential well into the late modern age. Heidegger, taking a circuitous route, arguably consolidated the path made by Locke for 'modernist' thinking concerning place, region and location. It is only in the 'post-modern' era that this path has been overtly realigned. This paper is a brief review of what are posited as the more important philosophical concepts that relate to urban morphology.

New paths

The 'post-modern' realignment has emerged on diverse fronts: but, for the built environment, particularly from Foucault and Lefebvre in France. Indeed, the recasting has a common theme in numerous authors: the rediscovery of the importance of place. But that place is not a fixed entity. The emphasis has shifted to place as a continuing dynamic: a component of history (Braudel, Foucault),

in nature (Berry, Snyder), in power relations (Nancy, Lefebvre), in gender (Irigaray), in poetics (Bachelard, Otto) in geographic reality (Foucault, Tuan, Soja, Relph, Entretien), in urban sociology (Benjamin, Arendt, Walter), in nomadism (Deleuze and Guattari), in architecture (Derrida, Eisenman, Tschumi), and in religion (Irigaray, Nancy) (Casey, 1997, p. 286). Within this broad ambit, the rediscovery of place, much of the thrust and substance of recent urban morphology may be located (see, for example, M.R.G. Conzen, 1960; Moudon, 1986).

In this paper, it is not possible to till the entire conceptual field; indeed there is an overwhelming plethora of philosophers, expounding on terms used in urban morphology: these terms include space, place, nature, boundary, site, streets, property, paths, building, and city/town. The full discussion of these matters could, indeed has, filled books. There are many threads and sidetracks of argument, many of them indecipherably dense and possibly of little relevance to urban morphology. But there are two predominant philosophical authors who have much to say that is relevant to urban morphology. They are Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre.

Foucault

Foucault is an historian of considerable importance to those interested in built environments, among many other matters with which he dealt. In his earlier work, he focused on medical space, work springing from that of Heidegger on 'nearness' of both time and place, but later he extended his ambit to include historical and political perspectives of the built environment more broadly, particularly institutions and their settings. He places considerable emphasis on 'the site' of institutions and on the way buildings occupy sites. His focus is on knowledge as power, and he identified 'space of domination' (Foucault, 1977, p. 187 ff.): isomorphic forms that reflect institutional

regime in the built fabric¹ – for example, the design of a prison that ensures isolation of prisoners. Bentham's panopticon was the key example, seen as a place of power, where the act of partitioning becomes a suppression of place (and time). Foucault saw himself as a scientist, examining evidence of built environments, in an empirical fashion. Extending the conceptualization of the power of place as a tool of analysis, Foucault suggests:

We might imagine a sort of systematic description – I do not say science because the term is too galvanized now – that would, in a given society, take as its object the study, analysis, description, and 'reading' of these different spaces, of these places (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

In the same paper, Foucault also posited that 'space itself has a history' (p. 22).

For urban morphology, both of these propositions are perhaps unexceptional, although by implication they do offer a challenge. They posit that space has a morphogenesis and is not a fixed entity. Its very conception resides in the society in which it is located. It varies from society to society and from era to era. Thus space and place are ever-changing historical entities.

In this context, a Foucauldian urban morphology would emphasize systematic description and analysis of relationships between the social and physical aspects of spaces/places, over time, right down to the scale of the individual site, but inclusive of the broader societal pattern. It would analyse their roots in social, cultural and institutional change and relate this to changing historical and physical circumstances. It would, in the same process, look for isomorphic patterns (or the lack of them) between built fabric, institutional regimes, owners and occupants. Arguably, much of urban morphology has for some time operated, at least in part, in this vein. One is reminded of M.R.G. Conzen's work.

It may also be noted that Foucault does not espouse a 'grand theory' of space/place.

Rather, he concentrates on the interstices of built places and derives social and cultural 'content' from them. This is also an important shift in thinking, as it legitimates small-scale studies, hitherto anathema to modernist urban theorists. It is also arguably crucial to urban morphology, as it suggests that the interstices of form, the places of a town, are as important as the built forms.

There is one other aspect of Foucault that warrants comment and perhaps more specific discussion at another time. He is myopic when it comes to the 'new world' and the 'eastern hemisphere', notwithstanding the catastrophe of French colonial experience. The entire world is a matter for urban morphology and it is significant that, within the first four issues of *Urban Morphology*, there have been important papers that do indeed widen the perspective beyond western Europe (Kubat, 1999; Satoh, 1997).

Lefebvre

Lefebvre is arguably the most significant philosopher for urban morphology. He was a humanist, Marxist and existentialist, in the French tradition, but his major work, *The production of space* (Lefebvre, 1991), is dense with concepts and pointers relating to space, interaction with people, constructed environment and all aspects of social space created by people. While the writing style is mercurial, and full of ambiguity, it also provides rich rewards.

Modern epistemology, argues Lefebvre, conceptualizes space as 'social space', unrelated to Cartesian references. But space is made a fetish to the degree that the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 5). Epistemological-philosophical thinking has failed to furnish a science of space, a knowledge of space. Semiology is incomplete, in being purely descriptive, according to Lefebvre.

This is a crucial point for those interested in social and physical space. If Lefebvre is substantially correct, most of the debate about

place arising from semiology and semiotics, characteristic of early post-modernism, is of little importance: this would include the work of Bataille, Benjamin, Derrida, Habermas, and even that of Heidegger. This is not to say that all of it should be ignored.

Lefebvre goes on to argue that, in the modern era, capital and capitalism directly influence practical matters relating to space: there is a hegemony of one class, the bourgeoisie. Space serves, and the hegemony makes use of it, with the help of knowledge and technical expertise. Power is exerted through space as much as through class.

According to Lefebvre, what is needed is (by analogy with physics) a 'unitary theory' of space that encompasses the physical (the Cosmos), the mental (logical and abstract), and the social (social practice, communication, speech). Clearly, such a theory is given preference over the pastiche encountered in 'post-modern' architecture in particular (King, 1996, p. 129).

An inventory of spatial terms that describe space (for example, room, market-place, street, shopping centre, public space) may result in a spatial code, a system of space, exposing through the actual production of space the various kinds of space and the modalities of their genesis (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 16). The extent to which a space may be decoded relies on ability to read it.

A code language may be said to have existed, on a practical basis, with specific relationships between town, country, political territory, language, and so on, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, founded on classical Euclidean space. Then, around 1910, 'the space of common sense, of knowledge, of social practice, of political power, space enshrined in every day discourse as in abstract thought, the channel for communications, of classical perspective geometry based on Euclid, bodied in, among other things, the form of the city and town' (p. 25) was destroyed. Euclidean and perspectivist spaces ('town' and 'history', for example) have, according to Lefebvre, disappeared as systems of reference. What he meant, I think, is that basic social and

cultural values in Europe were destroyed, thereby destroying the validity of the Euclidean logic that went with them.

If Lefebvre is right, then parts of urban morphology are on slippery ground: there is the implication that, before 1910, one lexicon of spatial code may have applied, but in subsequent time another quite different lexicon would apply. This would certainly impede cross-period comparisons, the essence of morphogenesis.

Lefebvre asks, should there be an attempt to first describe the destruction of and then reconstruct such a meta code of space? If spatial codes have existed, produced along with the spaces corresponding to them, the task becomes the elucidation of their source, role, and demise, stressing their dialectical character (but not destroy them) and perhaps the construction of new codes. This would encapsulate a shift from products to production, a major shift in thinking. So, the Marxist concern with production is thereby extended to include the production of space.

However, morphological research tends to operate in the Euclidean materialist space; not cognizant of (or ignoring) social and mental space, and so perhaps misreading physical space. This raises a gamut of difficult issues: if space embodies social relationships, how and why does it do so? And what relationships are they? Is social space indistinguishable from mental space, and physical space? (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27).

Part of the difficulty is that a rough coincidence is assumed between social, physical and mental space, while at the same time, in philosophy, 'things' no longer are more real than thoughts. For Lefebvre, production processes and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas.

It might also be interposed here that the Foucauldian agenda, of searching for refound cultural memories, presently locked in the institutions and morphology of the city, which may be seen in the work of Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman, would seem relevant here. Both architects refer to the (mental) knowledge of the fabric of the city

as making transparent the physical fabric, rather than the inverse. Interestingly, Michael Conzen argues from a basis similar to Lefebvre's, referring to cultural-historical dimensions: 'each society produces its own urban landscape, working into the detailed configuration almost every assumption, objective, skill, and preference of the society at large' (M.P. Conzen, 1978, p. 142).

These points lead Lefebvre to a series of propositions (linking social, mental and physical space): first, natural space is disappearing and so lost to thought; secondly, every society produces its own appropriated space; and thirdly, if space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound and expand the process of production.

These three propositions, in turn, produce three interconnected concepts. First, there is perceived spatial practice: the production of space characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice is revealed through the deciphering of its space. There is a close association between daily routines and urban reality. Spatial practice may be defined, for example, as the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project. Secondly, there are conceived representations of space: knowledge of planners, urbanists, technocrats, and social engineers. All of these arguably identify what is lived with what is conceived, and can dominate space in any society. Thirdly, there is lived representational space: associated images, symbolism, perhaps coded, perhaps linked to concealed social life. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of objects.

It is arguable that these propositions are the essence of what urban morphology needs to focus on. Exactly how and why a society contrives to produce its space is the key issue. For example, representations of space require knowledge, understanding. They may be abstract, but play a part in social and political practice. Representational space, however, relies on imaginary and symbolic content, from history and people.

Representations of space encapsulate

knowledge and ideology, while representational spaces have their sources in social history. Thus there is a need to consider the history of representations of space and their specific role in the production of space. The history of towns, from ancient times, to the feudal system, through the Renaissance to contemporary merchant capitalism, reflects a changing spatial code that is still valued today as a means of understanding the code, of understanding its production. Not that exact correspondence to accepted periodizations necessarily applies.

The corollary may also apply: if each society produces its own space: a 'social existence' that has not produced its own space must eventually fail as a society.

Conclusion

In attempting to delineate some philosophical base for urban morphology, this paper cannot claim to be all-inclusive. But it is clear enough that much urban morphology is, or may be, in close alignment with the two philosophers, Foucault and Lefebvre. In a sense, urban morphology is in the mainstream of post-modern philosophical debate, although not often explicitly so, but rather implicitly, through its concern with place and form.

There is, then, some potential benefit in reflecting on the works of these and other authors, in order to further develop some philosophical base to urban morphology. The following axioms are posited as one basic framework for a philosophical base to urban morphology, some points of departure for the further journey. First, the systematic description and analysis of city/town as place, revealing spatial practice, needs to highlight everyday social, cultural and institutional processes, so that 'product' is understood through 'production'. Secondly, identification of isomorphic patterns between physical fabric and institutional regimes, owners and occupants, useful to urbanists, needs to rely on valid spatial codes that integrate physical, mental and social

concepts. Thirdly, representational space, lived space, discovered through history and built elements, is as important in urban morphology as representations of space: both need to be encompassed in order to understand the city/town.

Note

1. Isomorphic in the sense that the built form facilitates the institutional regime. Isomorphous patterns are likely to be important in many aspects of urban morphology.

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