

# Berlin and London: two cultures and two kinds of urban squares

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**Abstract.** *The contrasting planning cultures that gave rise to urban squares in London and Berlin in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries are explored. The differences reflect the different roles played by king or state, the different types of interaction between landowners, builders and their clientele, the different origins of financial resources invested in urban development, the different forms of land tenure and ways of disposing of land for urbanization, and the significance of different 'conceptual paradigms' concerning urban open space. In London the concept of *rus in urbe* entailed primarily the upgrading of a marketable urban product (plots and dwellings), whereas in Berlin the conventional notion of public space related to a 'representative public stage' provided by a monarch and serving primarily his own glorification.*

*Key Words:* planning culture, *rus in urbe*, urban space, Berlin, London

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The German art professor, Karl Phillip Moritz, visiting London in 1783, compared favourably the London 'garden squares' to public squares in Berlin. He wrote:

It must, I think, be owned, that upon the whole, London is neither so handsomely nor so well built as Berlin is; but then it certainly has far more fine squares. Of these there are many that in real magnificence and beautiful symmetry by far surpass our Gens d'Armes Markey, our Doenhoff and Wilhelm Square. In London the squares, quadrangular urban spaces, contain the best and most beautiful buildings; a spacious street, next to the houses, goes all around them, and within that there is generally a round grass-covered plot, railed in with iron rails ... In Grosvenor Square, instead of a grass-covered plot, there is a little circular wood, no doubt, to give one the idea of *rus in urbe* (Moritz, 2007, p. 44).

When comparing public squares created by the Prussian royalty in Berlin with privately-

used green residential squares in London laid out by private landowners, mainly in the so-called 'Noble West', Moritz had evidently registered the lack of hard-surfaced open squares in London. In sharp contrast to Berlin, London left him with the impression of an entirely 'civilian city'. This impression was reinforced when he discovered the concept of *rus in urbe* applied to large residential areas, such as the Grosvenor Estate. The 'garden square' presented a new specimen of urban space, entirely unknown in Berlin in Moritz's time, where only intensely used public squares were to be found with surfaces cobbled or covered with stone slabs or gravel: parade grounds, church squares, market squares and entry squares in front of outstanding buildings. These, taken together with adjoining buildings, characterized by and large the 'petrified town' (Hegemann, 1930). Landscape was strictly kept out of town. It was cultivated in public parks, such as the Tiergarten in Berlin, a

former royal park. But green was rarely admitted within the streets and squares of the main urban area. If it was, it was only in the shape of 'drilled nature'.

The comparative assessment formulated by Moritz lets us recognize two simultaneous but mutually opposed cultures of urban planning. Moritz hailed from Berlin, the Prussian royal capital with its 'late-absolutist, autocratic culture of planning' in which the production of public space was entirely in the hands of the absolutist sovereign, the King of Prussia. His policy of highlighting his royal power by way of impressive avenues, grand public buildings, precise military parades and artful monuments recalling his own victories and his glorious ancestry was of far greater importance to him than respect for the most elementary needs of the majority of his townsmen.

In London, however, Moritz encountered the results of an 'early modern, liberal culture of urban planning', expressing wealth, individual achievement and civic values in public space. But he could not grasp the fact that residential estates and garden squares were based on a free real-estate market, in which only investments promising an increase of personal status for clients or a monetary gain for developers were considered as being important.

At this time, both in Britain and on the Continent, there was growing concern for public health, the safety of inhabitants, more comfortable living conditions and ease of urban transport. There was concern for an urban fabric with increased spaciousness, interwoven with greenery and improved accessibility. However, the German states, including Prussia, were poor compared to Great Britain – correspondingly their efforts to reform lagged far behind.

To facilitate a comparison between two contemporary but sharply differing urban planning cultures it is instructive to consider first the more backward culture of urban planning found in Berlin. Then an examination will be made of the planning culture exemplified by the Noble West of London. Here the garden square was introduced as a new design element enhancing the

wealth of urban developers and the quality of urban life of those who were able to benefit from it. Finally, an outline will be provided of the conceptual paradigm of *rus in urbe* as it evolved in Great Britain in the eighteenth century.

### **Late-absolutist autocratic planning culture in Berlin**

Almost every sovereign in the roughly 300 German states existing in 1800 was engaged in urban development, mainly the expansion of existing towns. Sovereigns had the power to shape the process of urban development and its physical form according to their 'own desire and will'.

#### *Absolutism as a basic norm of planning culture*

A German sovereign ruled his country 'by the grace of God'. He stood above the law and it was considered self-evident that he would give concrete expression to the culture of urban planning in his country. He would determine values and goals, and the use of resources and the patterns of interaction between all those involved in urban development. He would also select the conceptual paradigms that were to be realized. Not least, he would supervise the drawing up of a binding master plan, regulating boundaries, land subdivision with respect to social standing, land use, position of streets, location and types of squares, and location of public buildings and infrastructure. A sovereign frequently supplemented his master plan by a local or state-wide building statute, prescribing fire-proof building materials and often defining a variety of 'model houses' (Fehl, 2007, pp. 36-42).

#### *Allocation of land and natural resources*

As 'father of his country', a sovereign had a duty to not only protect his subjects, but provide for their shelter and well-being in town and country and support trade and crafts.

But his subjects were not considered to be equal: townsmen were more skilled and contributed more as taxpayers to the wealth of country and sovereign than the uneducated, unskilled and poor countrymen. He allocated the resources of his country according to social rank, merit, skill, and contribution to tax income. He selected newcomers to his towns by graciously admitting the skilled or sufficiently wealthy as citizens. These citizens were allocated building plots in locations befitting their social standing and were granted the right to build their own houses according to the house model assigned to them. Allocation of a building plot to an admitted citizen, however, entailed lesseeship as a sub-proprietor with the sovereign as landlord. The leasehold was for an unlimited term. To assist house-building, a sovereign often drew on the resources of his country to provide building materials for his new leaseholders.

### *Masterplanning*

Urban development was one of the most demanding and costly tasks of a sovereign. The initiative to found a new town or extend an existing one was his incontestable prerogative. Sometimes the motive was to attract additional, well-qualified people from other countries: newcomers urgently needed by his administration, the court or the army, or to contribute to the economy of the country. It often happened that he was compelled to react to material needs when the population of one of his towns was growing faster than expected. As this was leading to a shortage of dwellings, it required him to plan the extension of the urban area, and provide sufficient land for building more houses.

For military, aesthetic, tax and legal reasons it was a normal aspect of urban development to impose a ban on house-building outside an existing or scheduled town. Citizens had to live inside the town, whereas outside in designated but unregulated suburban areas (without master plan, building code, surfaced streets, protection or taxation) poorer people were usually allowed to live in improvised

wooden huts: here there resided labourers hired on a daily basis and often working with fire, such as potters.

When it came to opening up new lands for an urban extension, a sovereign selected an appropriate site and fixed its boundaries. Inside these his court architect drew up proposals for land subdivision: streets, squares and building plots. The master plan finally chosen by the sovereign determined, in combination with the prescribed model houses, the location, size and form of dwellings of those selected as new citizens. It served the purpose of creating a visible hierarchical order from the sovereign's palace down to the suburban huts of the poor. In contrast to the splendid palace, a sovereign usually insisted on the subordinate, modest and unified appearance of the various residential areas of his subjects. In preventing extravagant self-expression by individual house owners, the coherent design of streets played a significant role in the hands of a sovereign. The façades of the houses were erected on the edge of the street. The prescribed upper limits of the façades, the eaves, were conceived as another pair of horizontal lines on either side of the street. Thus two pairs of consecutive lines shaped the public three-dimensional 'perspective space', unified in volume, and, if considered important, aiming at a distant 'point de vue' (Fehl, 2007, pp. 19-33).

The master plan clearly separated land dedicated to public communication from building land: it separated the public sphere of streets and squares on land in public ownership from the private sphere of plots and private houses built on them. But the façades of private houses were at the same time the street façades of the public space. Thus a sovereign reserved to himself full control over shaping the three-dimensional form of public urban space. This tradition may explain the continued importance attached to urban design in Germany today.

Building plots were allocated to new citizens who were willing to build a house and had sufficient financial or physical means to accomplish this within the prescribed time of 2 or 3 years. On the ground floor of their

houses they usually had to provide a rent-free apartment, comprising a living room and a kitchen, to be given by the sovereign to the domestic staff of his court or to officers of his army.

The sovereign was also in charge of the public and private discipline of his townsmen. Having granted a building plot to a new citizen, a sovereign could later withdraw it if the plot holder gave him reason to do so: for example, in the event of open disobedience, or when a newly admitted citizen did not manage to roof his house within the prescribed period of time. Withdrawal of the allocated building plot also included the private house erected on it (Ermann, 1907, pp. 5-23).

#### *Reorganization of urban land and property relations*

Based on a master plan approved by the sovereign, the boundaries of fields or meadows were usually removed and the land consolidated. A necessary precondition of this was that the required land was either the sovereign's personal property or the property of the state. Where land was owned or leased by one of his subjects, there would normally be a 'land swap' or, in the case of commoners, the sovereign would resort to 'forced expropriation against compensation' based on his monarchical privilege of 'eminent domain'. The undivided land could then be subdivided by surveyors according to the approved master plan.

#### *Parsimony in urban development*

Economy in the use of resources played an important role in the drawing up of a master plan. Since early absolutism, parsimony had been normal for sovereigns faced with financial constraints. Such constraints tended to be a consequence of recurrent warfare, extravagant entertainment at court and meagre tax income (Elias, 1994, pp. 103-5). In saving money, a sovereign had several options when it came to urban development. If pieces of

land had to be expropriated and compensation paid for, parsimony was essential, though it was accepted by his subjects only with bitterness. In the case of urban infrastructure (for example, pipes for drinking water), it was common practice to rely on unpaid labour (for example, soccage if still applicable, soldiers in times of peace, and prisoners) rather than paid labour.

#### *Public urban squares*

One particular type of cost saving in urban development concerns the network of public space. Savings were attainable by varying the physical dimensions of the network: for example, by reducing the width and length of streets and the dimensions of squares. Further savings could be achieved by differentiating the quality of surfaces: for example, by only having representative streets or squares covered with expensive slabs of granite, while using cobblestones for surfacing market squares or gravel in locations of low-residential status. The complete omission of squares saved the cost of surfacing. It also allowed extra land to be subdivided into building plots, thus contributing to the income of the sovereign from leases and taxes. In town expansions after 1800, urban squares were often either completely omitted or their size and number were reduced to a bare minimum.

#### *The demise of late-absolutist planning culture*

Autocratic planning culture in Germany after 1800 increasingly showed signs of obsolescence. Important societal changes had taken place elsewhere in the continent of Europe, culminating in the French Revolution (1789-95), Napoleon's military marches across Europe (1804-14) and, after his defeat, the Congress of Vienna (1814-15). In the course of these changes the number of German states was reduced drastically to about 30 and the shape of their territories was reorganized. The urban bourgeoisie demanded more freedom

and equality and could no longer be disregarded by sovereigns, particularly after private property had been guaranteed and the right to trade land had been generally introduced. All this taken together left absolutist rulers behind the times, insecure and weakened. In the western parts of Germany many of them conceded to the adoption of constitutions and parliaments, whereby control over state funds passed into the hands of parliaments and state administrations. Subsequently, important aspects of the autocratic culture of planning were in a state of flux, though at different rates in different countries. For example, Prussia followed only tardily and haltingly in 1858 in adopting a constitution, and did not hand over responsibility for urban planning to its communities until 1875 (Bascon-Borgelt, 1983, pp. 21-30).

### **Early-modern liberal planning culture in London**

In London, some of the decisive preconditions of high-quality production of housing estates had existed long before 1800. Practices that had proved to be useful were maintained in the urban planning culture of the eighteenth century. As new social demands developed, however, they led to additional or refined norms. By 1800 there existed a broad range of variations in practical approaches, types of interaction, and conceptual paradigms of urban form.

#### *The parliamentary system and new cultures of urban planning*

In Great Britain in 1689, the concentration of power in the hands of the king had come to an end and the parliamentary system had been secured. The new system, with its House of Lords and House of Commons, opened the door for greater private initiative and greater political participation by both nobility and members of the middle and upper classes that were in possession of property. Political parties formed which, on the side of the

Royalists, tried to preserve the old absolutist culture, while the Whigs pressed for progress and liberalization.

In London two opposing planning cultures evolved side by side. The one of interest here was in the hands of landlords owning large estates in the neighbourhood of London and nearby Westminster. By converting these mostly agricultural estates into residential estates for the middle and upper classes, coherent areas of urban expansion were created in the hands of about 20 large private landowners. The other planning culture – controlled by numerous small slum-landlords providing accommodation for the large and rapidly growing mass of artisans, factory workers and other labourers – will not be dealt with here. Neither the king nor any other authority had responsibility for either of these planning cultures. Instead, they were controlled by private landowners: this was the risky business of dealing in land and buildings for sale (Clarke, 1992, ch. 6).

In initiating residential development on his land, a landowner would rely on his estate office to organize first planning and the physical aspects of development, and later estate management, including the supervising of leases. The estate office would exercise ‘many functions of today’s municipal authorities, from the production of the subdivision plan and negotiations with parliament and public authorities to the task of coping with various disturbances and re-establishing order in a housing estate’ (Hobhouse, 1971, p. 109). It was up to the landowner to engage well-qualified partners in the development process, notably builders and bankers, but also architects and engineers. The builder would for a limited period, normally 66-99 years, lease a number of building plots from the landowner. He would produce the required infrastructure, notably sewers, street lighting, surfaced streets, fences and garden squares, in conformity with the landowner’s plan. The houses were then constructed according to a design agreed with the landowner and conforming to the London Building Act, and sold one by one. The purchasers entered into the building’s lease contract for the residual

term of the lease (Hobhouse, 1971, ch. 7; Olsen, 1964, ch. 3). When the lease finally expired the plots and the houses built on them reverted to the landowner. The entire enterprise was not so much an 'object of art' as an 'object of business', with the design of space and buildings being instrumental to it.

### *Social relations governing urban development*

Britain, with London as the seat of government and the centre of worldwide trade, was the wealthiest country in Europe around 1800. Her wealth rested upon her colonies, her shipping and her pioneering industrialization. It was not just those who were wealthy on account of their noble descent who were key players in the upper segment of the real estate market. There were also those who had earned considerable fortunes since the seventeenth century in Britain or in the colonies from their engagement in profitable activities in agriculture, industrial production, trade and banking. Together, these two groups formed the so-called upper class; and while the nobility was still paying considerable attention to descent, its members had for long been engaging in commerce and related activities. At the same time, it was common practice to ennoble commoners of merit and to elect them to the House of Lords. As a consequence, members of the upper class often defined themselves in the first place not by their descent but by their individual wealth. In the eighteenth century, this upper class had grown accustomed to a lifestyle in part urban, in part rural. Accordingly, they would live part of the time in London, and part of the time on their country estates pursuing their agricultural, and sometimes industrial, interests. In London they would run their trading or banking business, or engage in politics or state government.

Since the early-eighteenth century a fast growing middle class had been emerging and was forming a self-confident clientele on the London real-estate market. Though landowners sought to win the higher strata of society as a clientele for their plots and houses,

they had to consider the new middle class as a clientele as well. The well-to-do, comprising only a tiny portion of London's population of about 1 million in 1805, were too choosy to make it likely that all the houses on a large residential estate, comprising 50 to 200 ha, would be sold within a period of 10-20 years. Several competing landowners offered a similar product at the same time in different locations. Some sites in each estate, especially sites centrally located within the estate, were more coveted than others. When drawing up a plan, large plots were delimited for large houses of the highest quality on the most coveted sites of an estate. The smallest plots and smallest houses were located on the least coveted peripheral sites.

Differentiation of plot sizes and street widths according to the market reduced entrepreneurial risk. Smaller plots and smaller houses could be offered to the more numerous middle class, thereby speeding up the sale of plots and houses in a newly-developed estate. Middle-class members of society wished to imitate the lifestyle of the wealthy, but could not afford the same luxury. However, if they could manage to live in the same residential estate as the wealthy, albeit on its fringe, they could enjoy sharing in a privileged address.

Facilities such as mews and garden squares were limited to the highest quality houses. Their use was reserved for residents who fronted the square or backed on to the mews. The leaseholder of every house enjoying this privilege paid for it in a correspondingly higher rent to the landlord (Hobhouse, 1971, p. 105). Thus in about 1800 in even the most opulent residential estates there was a well-calculated mixture of not only plot sizes and house types but also other facilities. And there was a social mix, as 'the rich called into being an army of servants and tradesmen, from bootmakers to physicians, who would dwell within easy reach of the elegant houses' (Whitfield, 2006, pp. 78-9). However, there was a hierarchically graded social order, as houses of only one type were normally erected around a garden square, or on opposite sides of a section of street (Olsen, 1964, p. 47). Broadly speaking, all the inhabitants of a street

section would belong to the same social class, and this was also true, at a higher social level, of those living around a garden square.

#### *The legal frame of reference of land subdivision and building*

The subdivision of land and the construction of houses were regulated throughout London and Westminster until 1858 by the London Building Act which had been passed immediately after the Great Fire of London in 1666 by King Charles II to reduce the risk of further fires. Apart from regulations controlling fireproof material and construction, four types of houses were recognized, corresponding to four social classes of owners. Three categories of minimal dimensions of street widths were specified, and the maximum height of adjoining buildings was also regulated (Reddaway, 1951, pp. 77-81). In 1774 an amendment of this Act had been passed specifying fixed tax rates for each of the four classes of houses (Höfle, 1977, p. 45; Jenkins, 1975, p. 52). The London Building Act continued to form the basis of London's planning culture around 1800. It safeguarded materials and dimensions and regulated the tax burden for the entire urban area, aiding long-range planning and facilitating comparison when plots and houses were marketed.

#### *The historical antecedents of land speculation*

Around 1810 it was considered a lucky historical event that the large estates of the Noble West had experienced a compulsory change of ownership some 260 years earlier. When King Henry VIII broke with Rome in 1538, he had confiscated all Catholic church property. He and his successors had made use of freehold grants of this land to members of the court to secure their loyalty (Olsen, 1964, pp. 6-7). These rural estates at the fringes of London and Westminster facilitated large-scale land speculation around 1800.

#### *Public and private responsibilities*

A royal land grant in Britain as well as in Germany was tied to manorial rights and duties: the landlord had to provide for the welfare and security of people living on his estate and had to 'maintain general order and safety' (Olsen, 1964, p. 10). A landowner was required to make his projected residential development known to parliament long before construction actually began and had to explain his intentions in great detail. This requirement was not prompted by considerations of urban design and real-estate marketing. It was more to do with matters of health and infrastructure, for example the provision of drinking water, sewers, and the street connections between neighbouring estates. A Local Act of Parliament eventually stipulated which rights and duties should be shouldered by a landlord and which he should pass on to public corporations (Hobhouse, 1971, pp. 109-13).

The landowner usually preserved the right to determine land use and building types. Above all, he usually remained responsible for the preservation of order on his estate; and thus he was entitled to make decisions regarding the public or private use of streets and squares on his land. Streets and squares did not constitute a public open space after they had been constructed on his land; rather, they formed a private urban space to which the landlord could admit the public at his discretion, depending on the occasion (Olsen, 1964, pp. 144-9).

Three alternatives were open to a landlord with regard to the private or public use of a garden square. If the entirety of a square, that is the street running around it as well as the garden proper, were his property and if the garden had been created as an extra-domestic facility tied exclusively to the adjacent houses, the lease contract of developed plots excluded the public use of the garden. Even if a public right of way had been established for the street running around the garden, while the garden proper constituted an extra-domestic facility owned by the landlord, the garden remained reserved for private use by adjacent residents. If, however, the houses surrounding the garden

square had been sold to private freeholders, and the street surrounding it had been transferred to a public corporation, such gardens could be opened to the public.

### *The dominant role of urban land rent*

In Britain, in contrast to Germany, freedom to trade in land had already emerged in the sixteenth century. It allowed a freeholder, regardless of whether he was a nobleman or commoner, to dispose of his own land as he wished: he could partition his land, sell it, lease it, build houses on it or raise credit on it. This held for leasehold as well: the annual income realized from rents or leases paid by tenants or leaseholders had become a measure of successful speculation in land and buildings.

Investments in improvements such as garden squares had an important role in marketing. The creation of garden squares contributed to a 'good address' and triggered an increase in site value. An entire residential estate could benefit in this way. Taking Belgravia as an example, Belgrave Square near the geographical centre of the estate, was conceived as an extended garden square flanked by houses of the highest class. Living there evoked a feeling of belonging to a community of privileged beneficiaries, each resident holding a key to the garden square as a status symbol. While enjoying collectively the amenity of the sweeping lawn and shady plane trees, residents could feel secluded by iron fences and well-clipped hedges from the curious looks of passers-by. The plots immediately surrounding Belgrave Square fetched the highest prices.

Most landlords, conscious of the fact that they would pass on their inherited estate to their own heirs, were interested in capital values. They aimed at an increase in land rent that would continue to benefit succeeding generations. It was a perspective that allowed them to 'draw up plans for marketisation of their estates without being permanently worried about a rapid financial return' (Olsen, 1964, p. 8). Large fortunes, only in part invested in their housing estates, made it easy

for them to conform to this self-imposed ideal (Clarke, 1992, p. 101). The estate might initially and in the short run produce only a small yield, as long as a high return could be expected in the long run, thanks to the British leasehold system.

The sense of obligation to secure long-term value influenced landowners' attitudes to estate management. They would seek to attain a certain spaciousness in the appearance of their residential estates. They were concerned about the solidity and respectability of houses, and to ensure technical infrastructure that was fully up-to-date (Olsen, 1964, p. 23). Garden squares, well maintained by the estate office, were an indispensable amenity.

In contrast to the contemporary German view of the matter, the production of a garden square was far from being regarded as a 'waste of land'. It resulted in an increased return for the landowner, insofar as the lease for the adjacent building plots implicitly included a proportion for the amenity of the garden square. The public effect of a residential estate that had one or more garden squares, like Belgravia, was not only highly coveted by the directly adjacent dwellers. The benefit of living in an urban neighbourhood interwoven with green and enjoying a high prestige also accrued to residents living in smaller houses at the outer fringe of the estate.

### *Precursors of garden squares*

The garden square was not a British invention. Its roots can be traced back to the Middle Ages: to the covered walks and enclosed greens of monasteries, to markets and church squares in Italy and France and, particularly, to the Place Royale in Paris, today known as Place des Vosges, initiated by King Henri IV in 1606. It was a large residential 'piazza' surrounded by 40 almost identical model houses. At its centre a large garden was laid out, being devoted to royal festivities and the recreation of surrounding residents (Sutcliffe, 1993, p. 20). Based on models like these, in London in 1636 a representative market-cum-church square was produced in one of the first



private housing estates, sited between the City and Westminster: Covent Garden, laid out by the Duke of Bedford (Borer, 1984, pp. 19-18). The cobbled square, framed by high-quality houses of unified appearance, has always been busy because of the market and, remaining without lawn or trees until today (Sutcliffe, 1993, p. 20), it has never been a garden square proper.

In about 1660 St James's Square continued this line of development in a private land speculation by a noble landowner on his estate close to St James's Palace. Here the spatial structure was almost the same as that of the Place Royale. Unlike Covent Garden, it functioned strictly as an upper-class residential square with a fenced garden and a sweeping lawn. In classical symmetrical manner two narrow streets intersected at its centre (Whitfield, 2006, p. 75).

The first true residential garden square was probably Grosvenor Square, the square so admired by Moritz. It was laid out in 1720 on part of the Grosvenor Estate (Barker and Jackson, 1990, pp. 73-4). Here, instead of four streets entering the square mid-way along each of four facing sides, eight streets entered the square, two at each corner. Thus there were eight vistas from the square into the surrounding estates, instead of four. In about 1765 trees were planted in the centre of the spacious lawn. Thereafter residential garden squares with central lawns and large trees were created within increasingly large residential estates, with some estates having several visually interconnected garden squares.

### *The basis of the Noble West*

As a consequence of competing landlords and their residential estates, London in the eighteenth century had entered a largely uncontrolled process of restructuring.

It reshaped itself, in a largely unplanned manner, producing a new social geography. Whereas the poor and the rich, masters and servants, until the seventeenth century had lived quite often right next to each other in one and the same street, exclusive districts

had been increasingly emerging ever since, especially as the Noble West was so privileged in climatic respect. Here one could find a sense of exclusiveness that separated its inhabitants from the mass of the population. It flattered those who could afford to live there. The other London, however, was cramped and stinky (Whitfield, 2006, p. 56).

In between lived the whole range of the middle classes – a distribution that was still evident in the poverty maps of W. Booth in 1889. The new geography was characterized in addition by a segregation of urban functions – industrial, commercial and administrative uses had become segregated from residential uses. This entailed the then novel phenomenon of commuting between place of residence and place of work, particularly between the Noble West and the City and Westminster. Commuter traffic and traffic jams were already becoming a public nuisance as early as 1800.

The fact that landlords were interested primarily in their own estates had put its stamp on the norms of the high-standard culture of urban planning. These norms were predominantly focussed on the land market and the ways of shaping urban space in relation to this. The individually produced residential estates in the Noble West were produced neither for the glory of the king, nor for the general populace. Instead they were meant to serve the specific and internally differentiated well-being of a wide range of different kinds of clientele from the upper echelons of society down to the middle class.

At the same time – and despite the selfishness of landowners and their various clienteles – they brought forth a unique townscape. Today, some 200 years later, many of the London residential estates of the Noble West, are still counted among the most admirable (and, of course, most desired) residential addresses in and around London.

### ***Rus in urbe as a British townscape paradigm***

After the introduction of a parliamentary

system and in the wake of agrarian reforms, progressively minded British members of the nobility rejected on their estates the concept of a strict geometrical 'French park'. Its long, straight visually important axis, its emphasis on centrality, symmetry and stiff formality reminded them of the previous domination of society by the sovereign. An entirely new relationship to nature and landscape was espoused which would 'make people forget the borders of the wide landscape and incorporate all its natural beauty; it was to be a work of art and at the same time a concentrated and heightened portrayal of visible creation: an expression of a new, liberal concept of paradise' (Buttler, 1989, p. 7).

Liberation from traditional courtly forms had been a painstaking process. In it the design elements, characterizing the still young British landscape architecture, became visible in the art of idealizing in a sublime way 'a landscape made by man' and expressing both 'closeness to nature and personal freedom' (Turner, 1986, p. 43). To this was added the artistic theory of the 'line of beauty' (Hogarth, 1753, p. 44). The serpentine curve was taken as a 'line of life'. It was employed when determining the course of streets or pathways as it was held to be commensurate with the freely roaming look of the human eye. Its purpose was that onlookers should not reach their goals, for example the landowner's manor, by traversing the shortest possible distance. On the contrary, they were to experience the beauty of the landscape as they passed through it before finally reaching their goal. The pathway would present a picturesque sequence of images of some rustic paradise fitted with fragments of classical architecture. The images encountered would resemble those painted by, for example, Claude Lorrain in the seventeenth century (Turner, 1986, pp. 27-30).

In the eighteenth century, against a background of growing concern about urban hygiene and calls for 'more light and air', landscape architecture found its way into the cities. Culturally well-informed landowners, having been aiming for more spaciousness on their estates, soon adopted the classical notion

of *rus in urbe*. Simultaneously, their wealthy clientele, being used to a comfortable life in the countryside, increasingly wished at least to find an illusion of a natural landscape inside the growing and increasingly built-up London. When planning their housing estates, landlords related rational design elements of classical architecture to picturesque design elements in the British landscape. And thus they produced a new synthesis of what later was called 'townscape' and around 1800 was called *rus in urbe*: a classical quotation expressing Emperor Nero's desire for open countryside next to his 'domus area' in the centre of Rome (Wood, 2004, pp. 1-4).

In hilly landscapes, as in Bath, landowners inserted their terraced houses in curving lines within their landscaped parks. The highest-class terraces were aligned on streets that followed the contours. Here garden squares were not required to produce the effect of *rus in urbe*.

In the flat terrain of London, such as in Regent's Park (created 1809-32), long lines of high-class terraces formed the edge of the park on three sides (Mansbridge, 1991, pp. 234 ff., 268 ff.). The wide, uninterrupted area of the park was left free of buildings, except for a few scattered villas. A lake and curved pathways and lush clumps of trees were introduced. The dwellings of the less affluent were kept out of sight behind the high-class terraces (Mansbridge, 1991, pp. 158-64, 263-73).

In other flat terrain in London, as on the Bedford Estate or in Belgravia, the concept of *rus in urbe* was integrated into a more or less rectangular grid. Several gardens were inserted, the streets crossing at the corners of the squares. A key feature of the new townscape was the multitude of straight vistas from square to square in which luxuriant vegetation contrasted with white classical terraces. It was an enchanting and, at the same time, illusory construction of urban space. Aiming at it, landowners could make use of the options offered by the London Building Act, choosing amongst street profiles which were differentiated according to house types and street widths. Garden squares that were

true squares in shape were space consuming and therefore reserved for houses of the highest class. Less affluent house owners had usually to be content with space-saving narrow 'squares' or ordinary streets.

Landowners had learned step by step to refine the concept of *rus in urbe*, so that by the end of the eighteenth century there was a new kind of townscape, with different types of garden squares for different clienteles. Besides the long vistas there were less important streets with closed vistas and there were also different terraces along streets from those around garden squares. There were also high-class 'terraced palaces' and, less noticeable, the more modest terraces of the less affluent: both played their role in the varied spatial character of the townscape. All of this would, in combination, give a particular quality to each street section. As a pedestrian traversed it, he would be met with sequences of changing pictures and changing outlooks. The straight streets of the regular grid would evoke the impression of spatial order and controlled variety and would facilitate orientation in urban space. All this would allow inhabitants to identify with 'their' estate. This kind of *rus in urbe* could only have resulted from a highly refined, urbane planning culture.

## Conclusion

Moritz had admired London's residential estates with their garden squares. Later on Continental, particularly German, visitors not only admired them but demanded the transfer of this form of *rus in urbe* to their own cities. They wanted it as an 'urban quiet public green square for taking a rest' (Stübben, 1877, p. 393). They wanted a public space to be planned and realized by a public authority and to be used by the general public. However, the idea of urban planning and the production of urban space by private entrepreneurs on private land and as a means of better marketing their lands remained limited in Germany to the circles of urban reformers around Stübben until the late-nineteenth century. Thus,

regrettable though it may be, the concept of *rus in urbe* was not transferred to Continental Europe: it would have needed that unique urban planning culture that had existed in Britain around 1800. In terms of planning theory, the general conclusion may be quite simple: a conceptual paradigm, if it is to be realized, needs to be embedded in an appropriate planning culture.

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## Cutting into the substance of urban form

On the occasion of the 200th issue of the professional journal *Architecture Today* a number of noted architects were interviewed to give an assessment of the state of their profession. Richard Rogers, in his interview said, amongst other things,

Another major development in the last 20 years is a much greater consciousness of the morphology of cities – that buildings need to fit in, and even if they contrast, you have to be conscious of what they contrast with.

This served as a starting point for a talk delivered to the Urban Design Group by Karl Kropf of Built Form Resource Ltd and the Urban Morphology Research Group, University of Birmingham. The general theme of the talk was urban morphology in practice and Kropf took it as an opportunity to present both a survey of recent work and a polemic on the role of urban morphology in urban design practice.

The survey of recent work illustrated the common use of the core morphological concept of urban tissue or character areas. Examples included conservation area appraisals, urban historic characterizations, as well as urban character studies, research into methods of assessing

environmental performance of urban form, the French application of urban morphological analysis to the Plan Local d'Urbanisme and the use of morphological analysis in design.

The examples were interwoven with an argument about the unrealized potential of urban morphology in design, by way of thoughts from the likes of Walter Benjamin, Kevin Lynch and Richard Sennett. It was Sennett's exploration of craftsmanship that provided the focus for Kropf's main argument. Sennett's thinking suggests an interpretation of 'urban grain' that has much more depth and substance than its common usage. Urban form is the material that urban designers must learn to master and understand the way a joiner understands wood, not just as a formal exercise but to serve life. Urban morphology is one of the best tools we have to improve our understanding.

A video of the lecture is included in the archive of previous talks recorded as part of the UrbanNous initiative that provides access to digital multimedia focusing on urbanism.

The lecture can be viewed in a browser at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/urbandesigngroup/UrbanMorphologyKarlKropf.htm>

The full catalogue can be found at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/udgevents.htm>

## The myth of tradition

The theme of the Thirteenth Conference of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments is 'The myth of tradition'. The conference will take place from 4 to

7 October 2012 in Portland, Oregon, USA. The deadline for the submission of abstracts of proposed papers is 1 November 2011. Further information is available from [iaste@berkeley.edu](mailto:iaste@berkeley.edu)

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