VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Unloved places revisited: archaeology and urban planning

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In his recent opinion piece on 'unloved places' Julian Lamb (2008) noted archaeology's capacity to reveal urban time-depth, but he also identified the discipline's tacit assumption of a separation between 'now' and 'then' as the inherent weakness in the archaeological engagement with *contemporary* cityscapes and in the archaeological contribution to the planning issues germane to those cityscapes. His comments recalled in my mind an assertion made more than 25 years ago by Peter Clack and Susanne Haselgrove that 'archaeologists still have no clear idea of what they are trying to contribute to urban studies' (Clack and Haselgrove, 1981, p. 3). Clack and Haselgrove were writing about medieval and earlier urbanisms in particular, and from within an English research environment, but their assertion had a larger geographical and chronological catchment at the time, and was an acknowledgement of archaeology's limited participation back then in the wider, cross-disciplinary, field of urban studies.

Most theoretically-aware archaeologists today would reject Lamb's comments as somewhat inaccurate with respect to the discipline in general, pointing out how postmodern reflection within archaeology has revealed the embeddedness of the construct of 'then' in the construct of 'now'. And, although not widely recognized (see Merrifield, 2002, for example), so-called historical archaeology (which describes the archaeological study of the modern period) has been pushing archaeological praxis away from functionalist interpretations of recovered data in the direction of a usually-Marxian social activism for the contemporary world, often in

urban environments (Leone, 2005; Schavelzon, 1999). Much of the impetus for this 'emancipatory archaeology', as Dean Siatta (2007) has called it (albeit in a non-urban context), has come from university-sector archaeology, and it clearly fulfills some of the facilitating, partnership and technical roles that Gilderbloom and Mullins (2005) argue that the academy should contribute to the issue of urban sustainability. The explicitly political agenda of some of the work in historical archaeology in North America in particular fits well with the view that 'each generation... defines the urban question after its own fashion, as an articulation of social challenges, political predicaments and theoretical issues reflecting the current conjuncture of urban society' and addresses that new definition through 'new conceptual tools and new forms of political mobilization' (Scott and Moulaert, 1997, p. 267).

Yet Lamb is largely correct. Urban morphologies of the recent historical past are often fully documented through non-archaeological source materials (cartographic, documentary, photographic, even news media), so the need that archaeologists *themselves* see for the unravelling of the spatial and morphological histories of urban spaces is considerably less for the modern and contemporary phases of towns and cities than for medieval and earlier phases. If such unravelling is considered less necessary – I would not say it is *un*necessary – does archaeology have much else to offer? The answer is yes, at a micro-scale. Within the broad shapes of urban environments, people, individually and collectively, create local, archaeologically-legible, habitational spaces; they

sometimes do this by moulding their signifying cultural practices into urban morphologies and topographies inherited from pasts with which they have no ancestral connection; other times they do this by simply resisting those inheritances and the ideologies which originally informed their creation. Herein lies archaeology's greatest potential contribution to the comprehension of the contemporary urban condition. But in many jurisdictions – I would not dare to be more specific – urban archaeologists have indeed, as Lamb puts it, 'overlooked [the] opportunity to investigate and record those inhabited urban places that still exist within our contemporary built environments'.

In Ireland, for example, the emphasis within the archaeological profession and the heritage agencies has been on the efficient retrieval of data from the more distant past, followed by its *normative* explanation (O'Keeffe, 2009). These attainable and quantifiable goals allow archaeologists in Ireland to contribute historical detail to the discussion of 'the urban', which they have done very successfully over the past 3 decades, but have neither encouraged them nor equipped them to intercede in wider debates on urban issues, except with respect to the physical preservation of what is canonically defined as heritage. It is worth noting in this regard that the Heritage Council of Ireland (n. d.) commissioned the Oxford Archaeological Unit less than a decade ago to review urban archaeological practice in Ireland, and that its comprehensive report, available on-line at http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/publications/urbanarch/execsummary.html, does *not* recommend any of the shifts in the epistemology, methodology or chronological reach of archaeological practice that might address Lamb's point; there is, in other words, nothing radical in the report's conclusions that there is a need for 'a practical definition of sustainability for the historic environment in the local context of urban archaeology, architecture and townscape', and a need for 'future urban archaeology research frameworks ... to establish some basic tenets about the survival and future potential of archaeological deposits, and some basic questions about urbanism in general as well as about individual towns'.

But I think there is reason for optimism. We must accept that archaeological interventions in urban spaces, at least in the western hemisphere, are usually developer-funded and of a rescue nature, so to explore the archaeology of urban contemporaneity is a luxury towards which no money is ever given. And we should probably accept that this has allowed archaeologists and heritage agencies to quietly wriggle free of responsibility for recording and interpreting, and for providing planning guidance with respect to, the materialities of contemporary cities and contemporary city communities. But we are beginning to see a change. For example, English Heritage's project on *Change and creation: historic landscape character 1950-2000* (Bradley *et al.*, 2004) (http://users.ox.ac.uk/~arch0217/changeandcreation/) is an imaginative archaeological engagement, by a national heritage agency often accused anecdotally of conservatism, with the sort of lived-in space that Lamb identifies as deserving of it. Even in Ireland, where radical archaeological thinking is not widespread, there are signs of change. One of the criticisms that I would level at *Urban archaeological practice in Ireland* is that it leaves working class and certain other contemporary communities in Dublin (such as the immigrant African community) doubly disenfranchised: their heritages are not old enough to be subjected to the same level of archaeological engagement (and legal protection) as earlier heritages, and the capacity of individual archaeologists to train their intellects on issues of concern to those communities is blunted by the requirements of disciplinary professionalism and by a narrow institutional vision of what constitutes 'proper' archaeology. And yet, the very same Heritage Council also generously funded *Placing voices, voicing places: spatiality, materiality and identity-formation among Dublin's working class and immigrant communities,* a project by myself and a number of colleagues on the heritages of three communities in Dublin city – the African immigrant community, the Muslim community, and the city's 'traditional' or 'indigenous' working class – of which the stated objective was to challenge fundamentally Ireland's official heritage discourse, as articulated by the Heritage Council itself. This willingness of a statutory heritage agency to fund a project that openly aims to subvert its own understanding of urban heritage is laudable indeed. The results of *Placing voices, voicing places* will be published in time, and a summary will be submitted to *Urban Morphology*, but suffice it to say here that the project's cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral membership, and its insistence on listening to local community voices articulate their sense of their own materiality, suggests how a conceptual road-map for an archaeology of Lamb's 'unloved places' and of other contemporary urban places will eventually be developed.

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On designing, inhabitation, and morphology

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The buildings and spaces that we create and maintain are inseparable from human life. We cannot live without some form of shelter and no built form will endure without inhabitation. Looking at built form is looking at a living whole and human action is its animating force. At a small scale it could be someone arranging things on a table or hanging a picture on a wall. At a large scale it could be the construction of regional infrastructure. There is no clear distinction between shaping and inhabiting built form.

As professional designers we place ourselves between form and inhabitant, claiming mediation. This position, as first adopted in the Renaissance, has caused us to see the built environment as a design product first of all. In need of a tool for our mediation we invented the concept of function. Although we all agree that form no longer follows function, we still look for a programme before we design. But Summerson (1960) already noted that there is no way a form can be extracted from a programme. There is always that 'leap of faith', as he terms it, that the designer must make to arrive at a form.

This intrusion of the self-image of the mediator does not work for observation of the built environment either. If we truly want to understand the marriage of inhabitation and physical form, we must step out of the picture, and try to see it as an autonomous phenomenon. Too complex to be considered a human artifact, which we can shape at will, the unity of human life and physical presence has its own laws, or habits, or peculiar properties, which we must accept and respect.

To obtain the distance needed for respectful acceptance, we must set aside our preferences on how we personally would like the built environment to be. This is a difficult thing to do. For professional architects and planners the question as to what is a 'good' built environment is central. We instinctively judge whatever built form we see. After all, we are paid for deciding what is good and what is not, and we have been taught how to make such decisions. Necessary as it is to guide action, the question as to what is a 'good' environment cannot help us learn about environment as such. It only can be posed and addressed after we have learned what we are actually dealing with.

Looking at the built environment as an autonomous entity demands that we find all forms of settlement of interest: the contemporary mega city as well as the humble village; Venice and historic Amsterdam as well as Beijing in the Ming dynasty; and the American suburbs as much as informal settlements like those around Mexico city