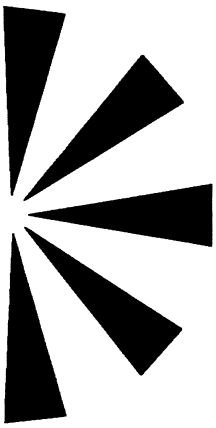

VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Understanding place?

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'Understanding place' is central to the concerns of urban morphologists, so a publication with that title is likely to be of interest to readers of this journal. In June this year English Heritage issued *Understanding place: historic area assessments – principles and practice* (English Heritage, 2010a), which is intended to offer 'advice on how to undertake assessments of historic areas – for a number of purposes and in a number of circumstances, but always with the objective of defining and explaining the character of a place and defining its significance' (English Heritage, 2010a, p. 3).

This is an important document since English Heritage is the British Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment within England. The broad aims of English Heritage, as set out on its web site (www.english-heritage.org.uk), are to work in partnership with central government departments, local authorities, voluntary bodies and the private sector to:

- Conserve and enhance the historic environment
- Broaden public access to the heritage
- Increase people's understanding of the past

This 35-page document is the latest in a series of general guidance publications and character studies of localities issued by English Heritage and summarized in *Understanding place: an introduction* (English Heritage, 2010b). It is admirable in its intentions. These include aiming historical assessments at a wide range of actors in the planning and development process (from local authority planners to housing growth agencies and developers), providing an evidence base for plan making and monitoring, and bringing together expert and community views to achieve an understanding of areas. It also endorses the importance of 'local and 'ordinary' heritage – what might be termed the buildings and spaces in-between monuments' (English Heritage, 2010a, p. 4).

In elaborating these intentions it notes that the 'developing study of historic areas has produced a number of distinct approaches' (English Heritage, 2010a, p. 7) and adds a footnote referring to Hoskins, M. R. G. Conzen, and Dyos. It is surprising that all the references to these scholars are to work half a century old, yet their work has been progressively developed and applied, including in the pages of *Urban Morphology* (see, for example, Kropf, 2009; Larkham, 2006; Maffei, 2009; Whitehand, 2009). To this neglect of more recent research in the field must be added the absence of those other seminal figures of the 1960s who were concerned with the qualities of place – Cullen (1961) and Lynch (1960). This is curious since some of the work positively referred to, for example on Oldham (Lathams, 2006), has been particularly successful in integrating townscape concepts with historical analysis.

Lynch's work and the way it has been developed in numerous applications, is of particular relevance when we consider the usefulness of historical studies in raising public awareness of the qualities of their locality. Again the document makes reference to the importance of this issue but no

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further guidance is given even though work in Lincoln (partly supported by English Heritage) has shown the value of incorporating community consultation early on in a historical assessment (Samuels and Clark, 2009).

There is an even greater disappointment in that the intentions of the guidance are hardly captured in the only specific demonstrations in the document of the application of techniques. The only map, plan or diagram is a historical land-use map and we know that land use, when compared with street system and building form, is a relatively ephemeral contributor to the character of places (Conzen, 1981, p. 80). It is also probably the easiest to map – the opportunity to demonstrate a mapping of building types or plot series has been missed. The two sample field survey sheets with which the guide concludes can both best be described as building records since they are concerned with such matters as current use, and the material of walls and roofs. No reference is made to plot configuration, building type, or the surveyed building's relation to plot or to the public space system. These are matters that are raised in the text so one might have expected them to be included in a demonstration of a method. They are central to Conzen's work and that of his many followers (for example, Koster, 2006; Lilley *et al*., 2005).

There is a quick-reference-guide version aimed at local authority planners and 'historic environment specialists' (English Heritage, 2010c), but it is no more specialized or operationally orientated than the longer version and is simply a summary covering the same material. It illustrates one of the sample field study forms from the longer document.

The main work is very densely written (with many references to other English Heritage documents) and far from ideal for a layperson readership – diagrams and some prioritization of issues might have helped in this respect. Nor is it of much help to professionals because of its lack of specific advice. Apart from the one land-use map, all the illustrations are photographs of places where the various types of study referred to have been carried out. While there is a discussion of the type of study that has been carried out, no indication is given of the methods used. In other words, there is much on what has been assessed in different localities and why, but nothing on *how* it has been assessed.

It would be useful to know what type of advice is given in other countries by equivalent agencies to English Heritage. ISUF would seem ideally placed to undertake such a comparison. It would not be easy because of legislative, cultural and linguistic difficulties. But this type of comparison has proved fruitful in the past (the continuing discussion between the Conzenian and Cannigian schools is an example), and the legislation that introduced conservation areas into Britain in the 1960s was based on a French law. The UK might be able to learn something from the experience of other countries.

Underlying a number of shortcomings of this English Heritage publication are the difficulties of interdisciplinary communication. A high degree of exchange is taken for granted by ISUF members, whereas it is much less common in the world of practice. *Understanding place* seems to be a victim of a disciplinary and professional squint. This suspicion is reinforced by the preponderance of archaeological and historic building interest groups in its six endorsers: Institute of Historic Building Conservation, National Trust, Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers, Council for British Archaeology, Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies, and Royal Town Planning Institute. In spite of its intentions, and the range of disciplines represented on the staff of English Heritage, it seems to have been driven from an architectural history position, while we know that the most useful applications of historical assessments have come from cross-professional and cross-disciplinary collaborations. It is not a technical problem – the concepts and techniques are demonstrably relevant and transferable. It is a question of the sociology of professions and disciplines which has to be addressed.

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Bridging the gap between urban morphology and urban modelling

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During the last couple of decades, advances in the field of urban modelling have been linked with a shift from coarse representations of urban form based on macro-economic and social physics theories to the development of more fine-grained models capturing the dynamics of urban growth and change as a result of micro-scale transformations of the urban landscape. Indeed, the latest crop of urban models grounded in cellular automata (CA) and agent-based modelling (ABM) approaches exhibits notable similarities with the field of urban morphology in terms of its underlying conceptualization of urban form (see, for example, Batty, 2005; Parker *et al*., 2003). Both fields consider the global patterns of urban form not to be so much a reflection of macro-scale structural forces as much as an outcome of the myriad individual transformations taking place at the level of the main building blocks composing the urban environment (individual parcels in the case of urban morphology and grid cells in the case of microsimulation).

The apparent similarity in the conceptualization of the processes of urban form generation and change shared by urban morphology and urban microsimulation highlights the prospects for an intellectual marriage between the two fields by which both parties can engage in a more direct exchange of ideas and knowledge. This opportunity for interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, however, remains underexplored, with the gap between the two fields fortified by existing and seemingly insurmountable differences in traditional disciplinary approaches. The most obvious gap between the two fields is in the time horizon of their urban form investigations. While the bulk of research in urban morphology remains centred on explorations of the past, urban modelling is concerned almost exclusively with simulations of scenarios for the future. And while experimentations in both fields have tried to bridge the boundaries between the past and the future on both sides (with urban modelling venturing into 'backcasting' and urban morphology used as a guide for urban and architectural design), the main obstacle for a closer collaboration between the two fields is marked by the stark contrast in the representations of urban form dominating the two disciplines.

The highly restrictive assumptions about urban form characteristic of the early examples of urban modelling still remain a key challenge in contemporary urban microsimulation. While CA and ABM models have broken away from the aggregate zonal representation of the urban environment, the tessellation of space into abstract cells employed in microsimulation rarely matches the physical patterns of urban development. A basic recognition of the constituent elements of urban form (land ownership pattern, street networks, and building types), critical in the analysis of urban morphology, is all but absent from CA and ABM simulations. In this respect, urban morphology identifies proven and well-