



VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Understanding place in the Netherlands

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Samuels (2010) critically reviews the guidance published by English Heritage on historic area assessments. He notes several problems relating to the advice offered. One is the lack of reference to recent relevant work in urban morphology. A second is the lack of demonstration of methods and techniques that can be used by heritage professionals. A third is the problem of work on historic area assessments being undertaken by people from different disciplinary backgrounds. In his conclusion, Samuels calls for an international exchange of information on the type of guidance given in different countries.

Consideration of the situation in the Netherlands reveals that similar problems exist there. The website of the *Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed* (State Service for Cultural Heritage) provides the type of fragmented guidance that is offered in the UK. Advice is provided by discipline, for example building history or historical geography. No effort appears to have been made to integrate the various disciplines and provide a holistic approach to the characterization of historical areas. The website offers nine brochures on legislation, 51 on building techniques and fifteen on 'cultural history' which, in fact, focus on various building typologies.

However, one brochure offers guidelines for historical building research (Hendriks and van der Hoeve, 2009) which includes work on defining 'cultural historical significance' that is applicable at a larger scale than just buildings. It specifically notes that any attempt to value cultural historical

significance should include a range of scales, starting with 'area' and going down to the level of 'building component'. The types of values mentioned (historical values, ensemble values, architectural historical values, building historical values, historical use values) are somehow connected with these different scales.

This perspective may well remind urban morphologists of the work of, for example, Conzen (1975, 1988) and Kropf (1993). Conzen adopted a hierarchical approach to townscape analysis and his ideas on 'hierarchical nesting' and townscape regions (Conzen, 1988) suggest that this concept is central to his view of the character of historical townscapes. However, no specific reference to any urban morphologist is given in the Dutch guidance. Furthermore, the brochure is far too concise to provide any useful guidance on how to combine the characteristics of the different scales into a coherent analysis of historical character and/or value. It does not provide any advice on how to conduct the fieldwork required; nor does it give any suggestions about how to map the results.

The question arises as to the problems of applying in practice the type of guidance provided by the Dutch equivalent of English Heritage. In 2006 the local council of the city of Zaanstad created its own cultural historical significance map of the area (Kleij and van de Poll, 2006). There is little reference to the methodology used but from the document it appears that three maps are combined: a map providing historico-geographical values, a map of archaeological values, and a map

that shows all the listed buildings and other buildings of historical or architectural significance. A description is also provided of all these different elements within the townscape. Although this method undoubtedly provides some understanding of place, it does not provide a replicable approach to defining, delineating and valuing townscape character.

As has been pointed out long ago (see, for example, Whitehand, 1981, pp. 142-4), urban morphological research provides an excellent basis from which to develop an approach to understanding and managing places. Unfortunately in the Netherlands, as in the UK, a lack of practical guidance and scant reference to the work of urban morphologists leads to variable, frequently unsatisfactory, approaches to the subject. There is a need for much more rigorous methodology, including in fieldwork. The basic groundwork exists in the research literature, including at an international level. As in the UK, the main problems lie at the interfaces between the various disciplines and professions.

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What happened to the backyard? The minimization of private open space in the Australian suburb

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It is not often that a dramatic change in urban form occurring throughout a large modern country can be observed within a period of less than 10 years. Nevertheless, this is what happened in suburban Australia during the 1990s. It has now been the subject of research (Hall, 2010).

Up until the end of the 1980s, nearly all suburban houses in Australia had large backyards by world standards (Head and Muir, 2007; Timms, 2006). The older type of suburban form is still characterized by backyards of at least 150 m², and they are commonly several times this figure. They generally have a practicable shape and significant

coverage of trees. Plot coverages by house footprints are generally 20-30 per cent with a maximum of 35-40 per cent.

However, in the early 1990s, a dramatic change in Australian suburban form began (Hall, 2007, 2008, 2010). During this period, the provision of large backyards in new construction ceased and the 35-40 per cent figure now represents the minimum, rather than the maximum, plot coverage. Although some properties may have backyards of 100 m² in area they are normally much smaller than this and are often less than 50 m². Moreover, the narrowness of the gap between the dwelling and the side