

their characteristics, and design guidelines for future developments.

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Stepping outside the comfortable confines of the West

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In Spiro Kostof's two classic metahistories on the urban artifact (Kostof, 1991, 1992), he emphatically argues that urban form is read correctly only to the extent of our critical familiarity with the precise conditions that served as its generators. On similar lines, Clifford Geertz – the so-called purveyor of small things – in his prolific writings deliberately chose not to formulate grand, overarching theories, instead seeking to find meaning in the *thick descriptions* prevalent across culture, time and space. If Geertz's definition of culture as 'the stories we tell about ourselves' (Geertz, 1973, p.14) in fact resonates true with academics and intellectuals that comprise urban morphologists around the world, to what extent have we actually written the stories that patiently await recording and writing? How often have we stepped outside the comfortable confines of our geographical settings to objectively view the urban settings of cultures that are far removed in intent and content? How critically have we viewed non-Western cities through pedagogy that negates clichéd bipolar opposites, and instead employs methodology emanating from thick descriptions?

Precisely why architectural and urban historians have feared to tread the arena of the non-Western world may be explained through a combination of complex factors. For one, the prevalent academic discourse to write and teach architectural and urban history in the Western world has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures, except at a superficial level. Bernard Rudofsky's

(1964) claim about chroniclers presenting us with a full-dress pageant of formal architecture, conveniently skipping several centuries and cultures, in his brilliantly provocative *Architecture Without Architects*, still rings true today. Likewise, invigorating research on non-Western urbanism – cities, urban fabrics and legislative processes – has not fared any better. If public forums are at all indicative of critical discourse brewing or not brewing within the ivory tower, the recently concluded ISUF and EAUH conferences in Stockholm, Sweden (this issue, pp. 42 and 59-60) engaged only a precious handful of presenters impassioned by their preoccupations with the 'exotic' non-Western. More significantly, it is worth noting that in both these cases, 'half the world and more' in Geertz's vein escaped the very act of *story-writing*, so much so that there were not even enough papers in this category to form a panel differentiated by thematic content or geographical region. In contrast, papers and contributions from Eurocentric and Western categories abounded.

Obviously, the task of an urban historian, morphologist and researcher is by no means simple. Unravelling the complexity of cities calls for a unique, multidisciplinary approach and draws upon a range of social, economic, political, intellectual and architectural sources. In exploring these different materials, the researcher must carefully consider the motives of the various actors who manipulated urban form often to their own ends and faithfully record the palimpsest of urban change.

Most importantly, they must approach the act of urban historiography and analysis not as a canon of precedents or a chronicle of progress, but as a complex and continuing enterprise. In the several decades preceding the twenty-first century, this necessary objectivity – so required for the study of cities in the non-Western world, given the unusual and frequently obscure nature of the sources and evidence required for their comprehensive understanding – locked horns with bipolar opposites proposed in the works of Max Weber (1968), Eric Hobsbawm (1975, 1987) and Karl Wittfogel (1957). The non-Western urban environment, more typically the Oriental or ‘Islamic city’, also found formulaic (and often heroic) elaboration as the negation of the West. In Zeynep Çelik’s words, most of the world now lapsed into homogeneity, signifying binary opposites, and defining by negation (Çelik, 1999).

In today’s era of profound intellectual change, and a rapidly globalizing world, where the Orient and Occident seem to collapse on each other as never before in the course of history, it is imperative for urban morphologists to pick up the strands of objective inquiry. Besides creating frameworks of investigation from within the cultural discourse and thereby addressing particular conditions embedded in time and space, there is desperate need to write more stories about urban worlds that are in themselves relentlessly changing into largely generic theme parks – ill-considered mixtures of influences from here, there and everywhere. A corrective is urgently required to demonstrate how the history and urbanity of the non-Western world prominently figured within the *longue durée* of world history, creating a vision of

Marshall Berman’s intertwined modernities (Berman, 1981). Must we adamantly wait for intellectual endeavours and stories to come forth from within the geographical regions we today designate as non-Western? Must we continue to sit on the fence waiting for this topical debate to finally begin?

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Ville Recherche Diffusion

A number of publications of interest to urban morphologists are available from Ville Recherche Diffusion, Ecole D’Architecture de Versailles, 2 avenue de Sceaux, 78000 Versailles, France (internet site: www.versailles.archi.fr/VRD). Among the publications recently advertised are:

- Bruant, C., Blain, C., Genaille, G. and Sellali, A. (2003) *Architecture et formes urbaines en villes nouvelles: enquête bibliographique sur les sources écrites*
- Doutre, M. (2003) *Modalités de transformation de la ville au début du XIX^e siècle en Auvergne l’édifice public et son espace urbain – pouvoirs*

et conflits

- Ducos, L. (2005) *L’aménagement des terrasses de Saint-Julien et des Carmélites à tours au XIX^e siècle: un projet urbanistique et architectural en décalage*
- Gauthiez, B., Zadora-Rio, E. and Galinié, H. (2003) *Village et ville au Moyen Age: les dynamiques morphologiques*
- Navarina, G. (2003) *Plan et projet: l’urbanisme en France et en Italie*
- Petiteau, J.-Y. and Chérel, E. (2004) *L’émergence du récit comme révélateur du processus de renouvellement urbain: ou l’urbanisme contemporain se réinvente-t-il à partir de l’art?*
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