Unloved places: an overlooked opportunity for urban morphology

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Change and regeneration are prominent on the agenda of many cities. However, a worrying consequence of this drive towards rapid urban change is that the environments we seek to transform are often demolished or abandoned to decay without thought for the value of the information that may be available within them whilst they are still inhabited and rich with a social landscape.

There are two issues. First, our most familiar places – such as shopping centres, office blocks and light industrial units – are seen as too familiar to be a topic for record or serious study and therefore enter a period of disinterest in which they are abandoned and very often demolished with little or no reflection upon their passing. Secondly, for surviving places in which time has endowed some revival of interest, such as slum dwellings and inter-war factories, whilst physical features can be recorded ahead of demolition or refurbishment, abandonment by the original inhabitants means that the social and ambient landscapes that once cradled within the bricks and mortar have gone. Making sense of these abandoned environments is often left to archaeologists and historians, but they are not the most appropriate people for the task: it is a job for urban morphologists.

As someone who has professional experience of both archaeology and history, I would argue that both disciplines are disadvantaged by the tacit assumption of a separation between 'now' and 'then': an assumption that does not encumber urban morphologists. Archaeologists work to reconstitute past social landscapes through interpretation of surviving material culture. For example, at the ruined Roman city of Wroxceter in England, lost coins, discarded pottery and wear patterns in flagstones can provide an impression of the social landscape that once existed. But this impression stands as a fossil to a once living creature: frozen, skeletal and lacking the essential texture of life. Even for progressive archaeology, such as Buchli and Lucas's excavation of an abandoned council house, there exists an essential separation in both time and identity between the investigator and the investigated (Buchli and Lucas, 2001, p. 81). For the majority of archaeologists a study of the 'present' would be heresy.

Historians also work to reconstitute social landscapes using textual resources that relate to a place that may have radically changed or even completely disappeared. Yet this material, whilst relevant and powerful, is not in itself the actual social landscape, and the material produced by historians is the result of an interpretive process that provides a creative impression of a past period from textual data that have survived into the present.

Arguably, archaeologists and historians are engaged in a mode of production: that is, production of the past based on artefacts and documents that have survived into the present. The past has gone, but connections, models and inferences in the form of research reports, TV documentaries and lecture notes produce an impression of the past that exists in the present (Shanks and Hodder, 1998, pp. 11-13).

Whilst archaeology and historical studies provide a powerful, relevant and necessary bridge to understanding social landscapes of periods that no longer exist, there is an often overlooked opportunity to investigate and record those inhabited urban places that still exist within our contemporary built environments: to create a record that is rich, vital and largely unaffected by the 'arm's-length' process of interpretation that historical and archaeological perspectives, by necessity, involve. And this is where urban morphologists, with their willingness to look at the past, present and future, can find a rich vein of material for research.

Unencumbered by a fixation on the separation of past and present, an urban morphologist can set about identifying sites in the 'here and now' that are in need of study. This may not be as easy as it seems, however, owing to the widespread, subtle process that seems to blind us to our most familiar places. There is a kind of temporal chauvinism in which more ancient places are valued as rare and mysterious and recent places are overlooked as abundant and familiar.

This can be illustrated by an example from Birmingham, UK. In 2002, a major all-new shopping complex replaced the post-war Bull Ring shopping centre. During construction, a great deal

of interest and archaeological recording focused on the discovery of Birmingham's distant past: twelfth-century deer park boundaries, thirteenth-century pottery kilns, late-medieval tanning pits and the foundations of some long-forgotten brick structure are amongst the finds that were carefully examined and recorded. The interest lay in the provision of interpretation panels around the new shopping complex, informing shoppers that on this spot once stood a Royal deer park, a medieval centre and communities of artisans handcrafting ceramics and leather goods. The post-war environment, however, was cleared of people, and then demolished with little or no systematic record save for a few scattered collections of photographs and oral accounts (BBC, 2006; Birmingham City Council, 2008; Caesar, 2008). The newly-erected interpretation panels are silent about the bustling Bull Ring, still warm in its grave underfoot.

At face value, there appears to be some kind of temporal chauvinism: material culture from more ancient urban strata is revered, yet our most recent environments are often anathematized. Forty and Kuchler (1999) suggest that this active, even artful, process of remembering and forgetting is a fundamental characteristic of any society. They argue that past periods and events are either commemorated or forgotten in the management of that culture's prevailing narrative: a narrative that explains 'who' we are and 'where' we are. Buchli and Lucas (2001) explore the subtle tension between remembering and forgetting and argue that when a place or an event passes from present to past, it can be subject to one of four general processes: *construction; destruction; deficit;* or *residue*.

The process of 'constructed' remembering is most closely related to memorialization. A clear illustration of this process can be found in the war memorials that are maintained in most British towns and cities. Take a few moments to explore any memorial to the 1914-18 conflict and, from our post-millennium perspective, it is easy to read the encoded images that would have located the inter-war viewer within a subtext of nationality (King, 1999).

Within Birmingham, the process of constructed remembering can be seen in the selection of places that have been retained and refurbished during regeneration. For example, in a stroll along Edmund Street in the heart of the financial district one can see the impressive terracotta frontages of late-Victorian structures. Closer inspection reveals that these are just preserved façades, behind which huge accretions of modern curtain-walled offices loom high above the original skyline. The new office complexes are inhabited by law firms and accountants who, in retaining these Victorian façades, have purposefully constructed a memorialized association with Victorian tradition, respectability and age-hewn stability.

The process of 'destructed' remembering is more difficult to identify because, as the name suggests, the intention is that these places are utterly removed from both urban fabric and memory. The process is manifestly iconoclastic and the removal of statues and buildings in Eastern Europe following the collapse of Soviet communism is a stark illustration of the purposeful destruction of memory and places (Forty, 1999, p. 10). Whilst challenging to identify, there is a place to the south of Birmingham, in Gloucester, where once stood an ordinary-looking late-Victorian end-terrace house. In the mid-1990s it was removed with forensic precision and replaced by a simple path that now forms a short-cut to a local shopping centre. There is no visible evidence that number 25 Cromwell Street ever existed. When the house was demolished, even the rubble was removed: crushed to a fine aggregate so that no material evidence or souvenir could ever remain. This place was the infamous address of the serial killer Fred West and his wife Rose. All memory and physical evidence of this place has been subject to a purposeful process of destruction: an attempt to erase events that are abhorrent to that society.

The process of remembering that gives rise to deficit is, in many respects, a synthesis of both destruction and construction. Even where some or all of the physical fabric of a place is retained, there are gaps and defects in the remembering of that place that can lead to a tension that is often palpable. For example, a walk along the canals and preserved Victorian waterfront around Birmingham's Gas Street Basin brings a vista of wine bars and exotic restaurants – a place to be sought-out and enjoyed – whereas once it was a place of pollution, industrial congestion and often death at a young age following a life of hard labour. In this place, there is a tension that leads a more sensitive visitor to consider what this industrial landscape was really like in previous times, before a gloss of tourism and affluence settled on it and silenced the dirt and squalor from telling its own story.

Subject to the fourth process are those 'unloved' places that are considered no more than 'residue' and of little significance in the management of memory. These places, when they reach the end of their life cycle, remain unseen, unconstituted and

left to decay at the time of abandonment. Ultimately, these underpasses, squatters' camps, container parks and vacant office blocks are often demolished, leaving little evidence of their existence. It is within this realm that Birmingham's post-war (and renamed) Bullring now resides. It is this realm that large swathes of urban places are on the cusp of entering; creating 'spaces of uncertainty' that both defy and define the aspirations of urban regeneration (Cupers and Miessen, 2002; Lamb, 2004).

Buchli and Lucas (2001) provide a powerful model that unravels the various treatments of urban places as they pass from present to past. Though devaluing the present relative to the past may be considered to be some kind of snobbery, it may in fact be a deeper expression of society's management of familiar places in the context of change and transformation. Indeed, Lowenthal (1985, 1999) would argue that it is part of a 'healthy' social contract amongst city dwellers that we must forget some things in order to progress and define who we want to be (Lowenthal 1999, p. xi).

Viewed from this perspective, it is easier to understand why the city firms along Edmund Street would wish to conserve the Victorian terracotta façades with their encoded messages of stability and respectability, but also incorporate a new working model of glass, light and open-plan offices. We can appreciate why the refurbished waterfronts along Gas Street Basin are silent about the appalling living conditions of factory workers and canal people who once inhabited these places. Perhaps we are comfortable with the silent passing of places that suggest failure in previous phases of post-war urban renewal.

What we see is, perhaps, less a conspiracy theory and more the 'healthy' civic processes of 'construction', 'deficit' and even 'destruction' that lie at the heart of regeneration and, indeed, heritage conservation. Structures and places within our cities are selected and modified, by whatever criteria, to be commemorated and conserved, whilst others are deselected: removed from the physical fabric and indeed from memory.

My suggestion for urban morphology is to focus attention upon the structures and places that enter those unconstituted processes that render them 'residue' in the eyes of contemporary society. It is within this realm that we find material that can shed light on our prevailing efforts towards creating equitable and sustainable cities. Such research would take an interest in those unloved, often anathematized, places such as post-war shopping malls and underground car parks, as they present themselves in the 'here and now' in a period before they become abandoned. This is a task that calls for the perspective of an urban morphologist who can work unencumbered in the present using a range of methods to record these places, with their social and ambient landscapes intact, and create an archive of great value to future generations.

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