

- a study in town-plan analysis* Institute of British Geographers Publication 27 (Institute of British Geographers, London) 2nd edn.
2. The academy was founded by Abbot Ubaldo Montelatici with support from the Grand Duke's Government: today it still brings together scholars and specialists in the field to discuss and resolve pertinent problems and it publishes a prestigious scientific bulletin.
 3. Biasutti (1878-1965) was a student in Florence and then Professor at the University of Naples. From 1927 he was a member of the Academy of the Lincei in Florence.
 4. Biasutti, R. (1938) *Casa rurale in Toscana* (Forni, Bologna).
 5. The direction of the series, published without interruption until 1970, was awarded to two students of Biasutti: Prof. G. Barbieri and Prof. L. Gambi, distinguished Professors of Geography at the Universities of Florence and Bologna.
 6. The debate, instituted by D. Adriello, can be found in the journal *La nuova città*, No. 6/7 (1946) 52-6.
 7. Conzen, M. R. G. (1938) 'Towards a systematic approach in planning science: geoproscopy', *Town Planning Review* 18, 1-26.

Housing associations and built-form conservation in the Netherlands: another gap to bridge

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A number of contributions to this journal have drawn attention to the need to bridge the gap between urban morphological research and practice and to the ways of meeting this need. The weak link between organizations responsible for built heritage conservation and urban morphologists engaged in research with a direct bearing on conservation is especially unsatisfactory. As an urban morphology researcher who has recently moved into practice in the Netherlands, I am struck by another lacuna in this field: namely, the minimal representation of *woningcorporaties* in the Dutch conservation debate. These 'corporations' are probably best understood in the English language as 'housing associations' – the term used in these comments.

A large percentage of listed buildings in the Netherlands are owned by these associations. Though exact numbers are not available, it is thought that they own several thousand of the listed buildings designated by central, provincial and local governments. The number is likely to rise further now that the Dutch government, like a number of other governments, has turned its attention to buildings and monuments of the period since the Second World War, many of which are owned by housing associations.

A number of housing associations are already playing an active part in the restoration of buildings and are beginning to consider more seriously their role in the field of heritage and conservation and their social responsibility towards it. Nevertheless,

the majority of them still have to formulate their policy on how to deal with these often vulnerable objects.

An example of a housing association that values its listed buildings highly is Van Alckmaer voor wonen, a small association in Alkmaar that owns about 3000 dwellings. Approximately 40 of these are either listed buildings or 'characteristic buildings' (*beeldbepalende panden*), considered by the local government to have particular value, often because they are situated within a conservation area. This association has gained considerable experience restoring and adapting listed buildings for new uses. One of its main objectives as described in its charter is to 'contribute actively to obtaining and preserving buildings of historical, art historical and/or local value'. Local built heritage is acquired, restored and, in most cases, made habitable. Prospective occupants of a listed building are only granted leases if they show genuine enthusiasm for living in a restored historical building.

This is but one example of a Dutch housing association putting effort into the restoration of the built heritage. A network of housing associations owning listed buildings has recently been established. This group aims to increase expertise amongst associations through exchanging information, knowledge and experience.

Housing associations are important actors and stakeholders in conservation of the built heritage in the Netherlands. They have developed expertise in

dealing with listed buildings through years of experience. Sometimes, as in Alkmaar, restoration is one of the main activities of the organization. Thus the links between housing and conservation need to be considered more closely in both research

and practice. There is undoubtedly a case for greater participation by housing associations in the Dutch conservation debate. Moreover, the issues involved have wider, international relevance, and include urban morphological aspects.

Zen and the art of urban change: *Wabi-Sabi* – a new perspective for urban morphology

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A quarter of a century has passed since Robert Pirsig (1974) introduced the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism to our Western understanding of quality. Despite little initial enthusiasm – his work is credited as having the greatest number of publisher rejections in literary history – his motorcycle musings are now considered seminal across an eclectic range of disciplines from modelling risk in large construction projects to electronic software design.

The central thrust of Pirsig's work is a critique of rationality: that is not to suggest that we should act irrationally, but that a certain 'fuzziness' in our thought and analysis can be highly enlightening. The argument is beautifully simple, it is proposed that Western thought is influenced by a historical discourse of rationality and bivalence: where something is either one thing or another; right or wrong; male or female for example. Much of Western science and analytical thinking are founded on this construct. Eastern thought, however, is intuitive and multivalent: where something can be one thing, or another, and indeed both at the same time (Kosco, 1994). This approach can serve to remind urban morphologists to be comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction.

Wabi-Sabi

Now that fuzzy thinking is more widely accepted in academic research and analysis, the environment is much more welcoming to the potential of other ideas that have an Eastern origin. With this in mind, there is an idea that could be of great value for those with an interest in our changing contemporary urban places: this is *Wabi-Sabi*.

Little has been published about *Wabi-Sabi*, and it is interesting to note that Koren (1994) argues

that it has a history of obfuscation: *Wabi-Sabi* is to be felt and experienced rather than rationalized and written about. Notwithstanding this, it can be seen that at the heart of *Wabi-Sabi* is an appreciation of things that are imperfect, impermanent and incomplete; it is a celebration of change and the inevitable decay of all things. As an artistic aesthetic, Western pioneers of *Wabi-Sabi* can be found in sculpture, textiles and design where, as an antithesis to 'modernism', artefacts are valued for their patina of age and decay and not their slick sensory reduction to simple universal lines (Brown, 2007; Juniper, 2003; Koren, 1994; Powell, 2005). But *Wabi-Sabi* is much more than just an artistic aesthetic. As an essential philosophy it can provide a new insight into the way we understand our everyday life, and indeed it can guide how we plan for the inevitability of change. For urban morphology, which is arguably orientated towards the study of change, *Wabi-Sabi* offers a new opportunity with two main points of cross-fertilization.

A critical reflection on historiography

The first point of cross-fertilisation relates to a fundamental re-evaluation of the historiography implicit in much research into past urban change. It can be argued that when we study the past, we are engaged in a form of production: we take texts and artefacts that have survived from past periods and, through a process of interpretation, we create an account of that past period – an account that exists in the present not the past. In urban morphology's sister discipline, archaeology, Shanks (2008) argues that the methodologies we use to construct an account of the past can be so strong that they overwhelm and over-structure the evidence, such that researchers simply find what