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 motor-cycle 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

they were looking for in the first place. Shanks suggests that *Wabi-Sabi*, as a conceptual framework for archaeological theory, can maintain an account of the past that is comfortable with contradiction and ambiguity and does not seek to be definitive. 'The irony is that such a design philosophy is far from remote and abstract, but profoundly grounded and holistic' (Shanks, 2008, p. 2). As a theoretical framework for interpreting the past, *Wabi-Sabi* has much to offer urban morphology. For example, a *Wabi-Sabi* outlook can act as a counter-balance to those attempts to provide a definitive account of a past period by inviting on-going re-interpretation and encouraging the emancipation of other histories that may not share equal status or authority at that time. This does not lead to the slippery slope of relativism, but creates a path to a more grounded approach that responds to de Certeau's (1984) concern that definitive accounts are the enemy of the past.

Living with a post-war reconstruction environment

The second point of cross-fertilisation relates to the attitudes people have about our contemporary urban places and reflects on preservation concerns as well as morphological analysis. Bearing in mind the fuzziness of the approach, *Wabi-Sabi* can support both preservation of our 'gritty' post-war environments and widespread removal of these places from the landscape: it should not be forgotten that *Wabi-Sabi* is an approach that seeks to hold contradiction.

On the one hand, *Wabi-Sabi* promotes an appreciation of change, decay and imperfection. Whilst this might seem appropriate for an ancient castle with its medieval and Victorian accretions, when applied to sites of post-war reconstruction, many would consider it rather perverse and would find it impossible to cherish such places. However, perhaps it is the mindset of aesthetic beauty that needs our attention rather than the physical place itself. *Wabi-Sabi* offers an alternative aesthetic that can help us appreciate the beauty of post-war concrete, complete with its cracking façades and graffiti, rather than simply sweeping it away in the drive towards regeneration. As an illustration, in the city of Birmingham, UK, the Eastside region has recently been the subject of much interest by developers who, it seems, are intent on removing the character of the place. It was, and still is to some extent, a place where modern light engineering firms, street corner cafés, short rows of late-Victorian terraced housing and a 1960s snooker hall sit like four children squashed onto the back seat of a small family car: crowded and noisy but tolerant through familiarity. There are clear links and parallels to the 'anti-gentrification' work of Jane Jacobs (1961) for example; but *Wabi-Sabi* could offer a new town-planning aesthetic for Eastside that challenges the quest for seamless geometric organization in our daily lives and supports an organic, imperfect, even gritty growth of a place and a more genuinely sustainable solution to urban living.

On the other hand, in apparent contradiction to our Western perspective, *Wabi-Sabi* can help find the balance of material 'things': the things we keep and, importantly, the things we let go through focusing on materialism and choice. Koren (1994) argues that, even at the most austere level, we live in a material world of things, and choice is at the heart of the matter: '*Wabi-Sabi* is exactly about the delicate balance between the pleasure we get from things and the pleasure we get from the freedom of things' (Koren, 1994, p. 59). With increasing evidence of the listing and preservation of post-war structures it appears that they are being collected like antiques, even if these places sit uncomfortably with the serious challenges of post-peak oil living and climatic change. *Wabi-Sabi* provides an intellectual framework that can mitigate anxiety about change in our urban places and appreciates the decaying nature of all things through valuing the importance of letting some things go – including those places we might describe as 'heritage'.

Wabi-Sabi: an Eastern mindset

This viewpoint is intended to be a simple signpost rather than anything like a comprehensive treatise on *Wabi-Sabi*. The sign is intended to urge urban morphologists to be not only comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction but indeed to see the opportunity that lies in this as a thoroughly grounded approach to historiography and regeneration.

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Informal settlements: a neglected aspect of morphological analysis

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Informal developments are a much publicized aspect of cities, especially in Latin America. However, little has been done to understand the characteristics of their urban forms or consider their design implications. In Bogotá, Colombia early work was done by Molina, Salazar and Salguero (1983) and Jiménez (1994), and more recently studies have been undertaken by Carvajalino and Avendaño (2000) and Tarchópoulos and Ceballos (2005). During October and November 2008, an 'urban design charrette' was organized jointly by the National University of Colombia at Bogotá and the Central University of Venezuela at Caracas. Studies were made in the field at Barrio Mamera in Caracas and Barrios Aures and Hunza in Bogotá. This 'viewpoint' summarizes the morphological outcomes of this work.

Caracas and Bogotá

Mamera is located in Antímano, on the western fringes of Caracas, whereas Hunza and Aures in Bogotá are located on the north-western side of the city within the boundaries of Localidad Suba, in a relatively flat area bordered by the marshland of Humedal Juan Amarillo and the Hills of Suba. Poverty is interwoven with improvised urban landscapes in both cities, but morphological analysis reveals significant differences between the cities and suggests some of the variety of design challenges that are posed.

Settlements in Bogotá exhibit more self-sufficiency and variety in their land-use patterns. Mamera has very few ancillary activities surrounding its housing areas. To some extent the 'barrio' in Bogotá is an integrated, self-sufficient community, whereas Mamera depends to a substantial degree on the city's services.

Hunza and Aures exhibit clear urban tissues, well defined public and private spaces, and a strong connection in form and structure to institutional social housing models. The most popular settlements consist of 12 x 42 m sets of street blocks arranged in a Cartesian grid with an empty block (100 x 40 m in average size) in the middle of the settlement for public services and park provision. Individual 6 x 12 m plots are arranged symmetrically in a linear manner along each block. This similarity allows dwellers to have easy access to legal infrastructure services (Cortés and Salazar, 1993).

In Mamera, in contrast, the tissue is configured in a predominantly organic pattern, reflecting a degree of adaptation to the steep slopes on which it is located. Peña (2007, p. 107) finds similarities between informal settlements in Caracas and the layouts of medieval towns. However, plots in this settlement have particularly marked variations in size and shape. Both settlements have poor links to neighbouring settlements and to the main communication systems of the rest of the city.

In Bogotá public space consists not only of areas for roads, parks and social services. It also includes various 'ecological' structures as well (forests, streams etc), whereas in Caracas public space appears to include areas free of buildings for only social, recreational and infrastructure purposes and it has an ill-defined and strongly fragmented pattern (Peña, 2007, p. 107). Both cities lack sufficient public space. Furthermore, in many cases the areas designed for public use are occupied by informal settlements, even areas at risk of landslides and floods.

Despite the uniform plots, houses have very varied architectural patterns in Aures and Hunza. In Mamera the enormous variety of plot shapes encourages even greater architectural variety. In