Conservation, heritage and urban morphology – further thoughts

Roger M. Thomas, Honorary Research Associate, School of Archaeology, University of Oxford, 36 Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2PG. E-mail: roger.thomas@arch.ox.ac.uk

In an editorial in this journal, Whitehand (2015) draws attention to the lack of integration of urban morphology into urban conservation. The latter has of course been a considerable focus of interest and activity in recent decades, both in relation to UNESCO world heritage cities and more widely. In the United Kingdom, the issue became especially topical in 2017, as this was the fiftieth anniversary of the Civic Amenities Act 1967 which brought the concept of Conservation Areas into law. The designation and management of Conservation Areas is the backbone of urban conservation in the UK.

Whitehand's implicit questioning of the minimal connection in practice between urban morphology and urban conservation is eminently pertinent. Urban morphology seeks to understand the physical structure of towns and cities, and how that structure has developed through time, while urban conservation seeks to shape the way that places are treated in future. The link seems all too obvious, yet in practice it is not there, or nothing like as strongly as it should be. I offer here some personal reflections, from a purely English perspective, on why this might be. I also identify some signs of what may be improvements in the future.

I have spent the larger part of my career working in the state heritage agency for England (Historic England, previously known as English Heritage) and I am sure my perceptions reflect this.

Within the overall spectrum of 'heritage protection' (and heritage professionals) in England, it is possible (if one is prepared to simplify hugely) to identify two broad strands, defined by subject matter, academic discipline, and the training, backgrounds and outlooks of the personnel involved. For the purposes of my argument, I shall try to outline these strands.

The first is what one might call 'archaeological'. It sees heritage primarily as a source of evidence for understanding the past. It has an emphasis (although by no means an exclusive one) on earlier periods of the past, and on rural as opposed to urban contexts. Many of its practitioners have trained in archaeology. This has often given them a strongly spatial outlook. Maps are an essential tool for the archaeologist, and the links between archaeology and geography are strong.

The second strand is what one might call 'architectural'. It has a strong concern with the visual, aesthetic and experiential aspects of heritage. Because it deals with surviving buildings, there is an obvious (but again, not exclusive) emphasis on the later periods, and on urban and other settlements. Many of its practitioners have trained in architecture, history of art or fine art. There is a strong emphasis on the visual, as experienced by humans on the ground (or as seen in carefully composed photographs), rather than through the 'birds eye' view provided by maps. The difference in approach between these two strands is well summed up by examining two recent publications.

The Stonehenge landscape (Bowden *et al*., 2015) presents a detailed and highly thoughtful archaeological account of the landscape around one of the world's best known prehistoric monuments. The book, which is based on new archaeological surveys of various kinds, is richly illustrated with highly informative maps, plans and aerial photographs. It is noticeable, however, that it contains relatively few photographs of monuments, or of the landscape, as they are seen and experienced on the ground.

Elain Harwood's (2015) *Space, hope and brutalism: English architecture, 1945–1975* is a stunning and hugely impressive book. It is illustrated with numerous photographs of the highest quality, which really capture the essence of the very striking 'brutalist' structures which are the subject of the book. For the purposes of my argument, though, an interesting point about the book is that it contains almost no maps or plans. This is despite the fact that the period in question was pretty much the high point of modern town planning, as well as being notable for some very striking architecture.

Thus, as these two books show, two very different traditions of scholarship, and very different kinds of approach, are evident within the community of specialists who take an interest in what is now referred to overall as 'the historic environment'.

How has all this affected the conservation movement? The origins of this movement lay largely in attempts to protect particular buildings and areas of townscape from demolition, rather than in a consideration of the structure of entire settlements. There was a strong focus on urban areas and on historic buildings. There was also considerable campaigning for the protection, or at least prior excavation, of threatened archaeological sites, including urban ones. Nonetheless, it was efforts to protect the built heritage which really set the pattern for urban conservation.

It was therefore natural, given the origins and development of the subject, that many of those who came to hold positions of influence in urban conservation in England had backgrounds in architecture or architectural history. The fact that geographical and map-based perspectives are not necessarily second nature to people trained in these disciplines may, I believe, help to explain why there has been something of a disconnect between urban morphology and urban conservation in England.

Happily, it is possible to see some grounds for optimism about a closer relationship between urban morphology and conservation in future. Since about 2000, there has been an increasing emphasis on the idea of a single, unified 'historic environment' – a concept that embraces buildings, archaeological remains, landscape and townscape (see, for example, Historic Environment Review Steering Group, 2000). This is now enshrined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which devotes one of its twelve main sections to 'Conserving and enhancing the historic environment' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). While the disciplinary divide is still evident among the body of professionals who are charged with implementing the NPPF on the ground, there is significantly more 'cross-over' than previously, and at local level, for example in Local Plans, policy is now usually framed in integrated terms.

An important aspect of the NPPF as a whole is the emphasis it puts on place, and on 'character'. This theme recurs through the document, rather than being confined to the historic environment section. For example, paragraph 58 states that new development should 'respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials'. There can be no doubt that the form of places – the pattern of streets, plots and open spaces – is a key ingredient of 'local character', and some Local Plans now contain specific polices for the protection of aspects of settlement form, such as burgages. The role of urban morphology in identifying the significance of different elements in a town plan is obvious.

In terms of defining 'character', a significant achievement of the past couple of decades has been the programme of urban and rural 'historic characterization' studies promoted by English Heritage. This includes Historic Landscape Characterisation, applied to rural areas and to major conurbations such as Greater Manchester, and Extensive Urban Surveys, applied to smaller towns (Thomas, 2006). These are map-based and GIS-based studies, which aim to document the historical character and origins of the visible landscape and townscape of today. The 'geographical' orientation of the urban characterization studies gives them much common ground with the discipline of urban morphology, and some of the projects have drawn on the concepts of plan analysis in their work (for example, Kent County Council, 2006).

One of the aims of this characterization work is to enable developers, planning authorities and others to take account of the existing form and character of places (and how this has evolved through time) when considering future change. The map-based nature of the approach gives it a particular relevance to master-planning (see, for example, Homes and Communities Agency and English Heritage, 2009).

All of this reflects what seems to be a more fundamental long-term shift in attitudes to change in the built environment. The traditional approach has been one of 'heritage protection', largely focussed on trying to protect selected individual buildings and relatively small areas considered to be of 'special interest', and to maintain these in an unchanged state as far as practicable. Now there is more emphasis on the need to consider the historical dimension of the *whole* of our surroundings (exemplified by the NPPF's emphasis on 'character'), while recognizing that change will necessarily take place. This trend was well-stated in the Farrell Review, which states:

> Our culture has slowly but radically shifted to one now that understands and sees the potential in what is already there, the value of place, identity and sustainability, and the recognition of this most importantly leads to a completely different mindset. It's not 'either/or' any more, and we must address what this means going forwards (Farrell, 2014).

For some years now, there have been signs of heritage protection merging with planning and architecture at large. This is seen in the philosophy and practice of 'constructive conservation' (for example, English Heritage, 2008). To a growing extent, heritage protection is less about trying to 'save' individual buildings and monuments, and more about working out how to change places in ways that respect and draw on their historical patterns, while also accepting that places must grow and develop to meet future needs.

The morphology of towns and cities is fundamental to appreciating their overall character. The wide concept of 'historic environment', along with the emphasis placed by the NPPF on character and the obvious contribution that map-based historical characterization can make to master-planning, are now important components of the overall approach to managing change in the built environment. Does this context provide a new opportunity for urban morphology to play a fuller role in the conservation debate? Understanding the form of places, how that form has developed, and what its historical significance is, should be an important part of this broadened vision of conservation. This should give great scope for the geographically-oriented practitioners of urban morphology to make a real contribution to discussions about the future planning and conservation of our towns and cities.

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The origins of urban rectangular plans in the Near East

Arthur Krim, Boston Architectural College, 320 Newbury Street, Boston, MA 02115, USA. E-mail: arthur.krim@the-bac.edu

Recent research on prehistoric village sites along the Middle Euphrates River between Aleppo and Raqqa in Syria has shed considerable light on the origins of rectangular settlement plans in the Near East. Based on evidence from proto-urban sites dating from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period in the ninth and eighth millenia BC, Edwards (2016) posits that the innovation of right-angled straight-lined building walls can be found at key Neolithic sites, such as Mureybet, flooded by Lake Assad from the Tabqa Dam in 1976. Here the transition from circular and oval subterranean building plans to fully rectangular ground plans can be dated as having taken place after 9000 BC in a period of warmer climate during which the transition occurred from sedentary hunting and