Green space, fringe belts and the historico-geographical structure of cities

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In their recent paper in this journal, Šćitaroci and Marić (2019) have focused on two important phenomena – fringe belts, specifically those related to city walls, and urban green spaces. Their treatment of these two aspects of the urban landscape prompts comments here on the relationship between green space and fringe belts more generally, the wider need to integrate green space more effectively into urban studies, and the importance of a historico-geographical approach.

First mapped systematically in Berlin as *Stadtrandzonen* by Louis (1936), fringe belts, characterized in a great many cases by substantial areas of trees and grass, have become best known through development of the fringe-belt concept by Conzen (1960). Other initially circumferential green-space zones that have attracted research on fringe belts in recent decades include those that have come into existence at or near urban peripheries during lengthy periods of little or no residential extension to urban areas (Conzen, 1969, p. 125; Whitehand, 1972). The associated reductions in pressure on land during these low-growth periods have provided opportunities at the fringes of urban areas for adding or preserving green spaces of many different types. Country-house parklands are among the most extensive of those characterized by very large tree- and grass-covered areas. Most of these fringe belts have eventually become embedded within urban areas and form intra-urban morphological regions (Barke, 1974; Conzen, 2009).

Despite much discussion of the importance of green space in recent times, within urban morphology it has on the whole remained relatively weakly integrated into mainstream discussions of cities as physical entities. It has also been poorly set within much needed historical context, though Šćitaroci and Marić's paper provides a notable exception. However, in recent decades the increased recognition of the benefits of green space for health and, to a lesser extent, appreciation of heritage, is providing an incentive to revisit and further develop topics relating to green space within urban form.

Geographers sufficiently familiar with past concerns in their field with the interrelationships of natural and cultural phenomena may regard these relationships as basic. But they are too frequently overlooked in current urban research. There has been a tendency too for green spaces to be studied by ecologists and biogeographers largely separately from the historico-geographical work of urban morphologists. Even in heritage studies, including within the ambit of UNESCO, urban history and nature tend to fall within largely separate spheres of investigation. Furthermore, appreciation of both of these aspects remains poorly connected to the historical grains of cities and associated morphological regions or urban landscape units, despite the importance of the latter concepts having been demonstrated long ago (see, for example, Conzen, 1966). Remarkably, these historico-geographical perspectives receive little consideration in the recent substantial international volume on the UNESCO historic landscape approach to urban conservation (Roders and Bandarin, 2019).

Šćitaroci and Marić are to be commended for directing our attention to the interrelationship of green spaces and the 'hard' elements of urban form, which in many cities comprise the minority of the urban area, particularly if domestic gardens are included in the calculation. More generally, however, the problem remains, both within urban morphology and more widely, of the poor integration of green space and the physical structures of urban areas, especially buildings and streets.

It might be argued that green space has for long been a significant consideration within some aspects of urban and rural planning, the rise and spread of garden suburbs being an example. However, from a morphological perspective there are many lacunae. In light of the number of fringe belts documented by Šćitaroci and Marić across a dozen European countries, the minimal reference to belts of this type in documents concerning urban planning is striking. This deficiency is arguably more understandable in the case of fringe belts associated with downturns in the cyclical pattern in the growth of urban areas, for these belts are on average less immediately evident in the landscape than those occupying zones related to city walls. Nevertheless, these often less continuous fringe belts, which tend to occupy larger areas than fringe

belts associated with city walls, are also valuable examples of bases for recognizing, developing and enhancing green zones. Of course, the tendency for these fringe belts to relate to more recent periods of very slow or stationary urban growth does mean that, to appreciate their full significance, settlement-wide assessments are often needed, not least in the case of sizable cities and conurbations.

These few observations, following on from Šćitaroci and Marić's welcome contribution, are, in short, a plea for an approach to urban form in which spaces, notably in this case constellations of green spaces, have an integral part. Greater appreciation is needed of the role of these spaces in physical expressions of phases in development of the historico-geographical structure of cities. Of course, this is in no way intended as a disincentive for detailed research on *individual* sites and their notable attributes. The key point here, however, is that individual sites need to be investigated and assessed within wider frameworks, notably as parts of morphological regions – such as fringe belts (Zhang, 2019). Such belts, not least as conceptualizations of the heritage of urban areas, exemplify the integral place that the recognition of historico-geographical structures should have in planning. They enrich our understanding of the configurations of towns and cities and merit a significant place in the shaping of future urban landscapes.

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Space in the city: reusing cemeteries

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Kolnberger (2018) reminded readers of this journal about the relationship between cemeteries and urban form; and recent discussions have highlighted the importance of green spaces. This Viewpoint seeks to draw these threads together and highlight the issue of land-use and urban-form changes relating to cemeteries.[1] This has long been recognised:

> in the 1880s a Mrs Holmes observed: "In looking one day at Rocque's plan of London (1742–5) I noticed how many burial-grounds and churchyards were marked upon it which no longer existed . . . I commenced to draw up a list of all the burying-places, of which I could find any record, still existing, or that had ever existed, in London. It was no easy task" (Bard and Miles, 2017, p. 1, referring to Holmes, 1896).