



## BOOK NOTES

**Observations on urban growth** edited by *Giuseppe Strappa*, FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milano, Italy, 2018, 211 pp. ISBN 978-88-917-6187-3. The title of this book can be misleading, because the book does not give a broad description of the topic of urban growth but highlights urban growth in the light of fringe belts. Giuseppe Strappa introduces the book with the description of these edge conditions that, although being morphologically very diverse, often show similarities in their coming about. Fringe belts typically take shape after a pause in the outward growth of a town. When it starts growing again, it often does so by leap-frogging these fringe zones, leaving an area of mixed land uses ‘as fossils of earlier urban development’ (p. 96). The book is divided into two parts and gives an overview of case studies in, first, fast-growing metropolises in Asia and South America and, secondly, in slowly-transforming traditional cities in Europe. Unfortunately, not all authors focus on this narrower description of urban growth, but those that do give interesting insights into the diversity and complexity of the phenomena. The first and fourth essays, discussing fringe belts in the Brazilian and Asian context, are especially noteworthy as these raise important methodological difficulties of identifying the fringe belt in rapidly-changing urban landscapes. Due to the speed and magnitude of urbanization in South America and Asia, the very notion of urban fringe that is associated with physical limits of urban growth and ruptures in this pattern of growth is challenged. It seems that these rapidly-changing territories create vast landscapes with urban fringe characteristics instead of clearly-defined zones between old and new zones of urban development. In the second part of the book, the growth of traditional cities is discussed where the complexity is not the result of the speed of urban growth, but merely the overlapping of fringe belts from various ruptures in development and the transformation processes taking place in fringe belts where densification is discussed as a

threat to the qualities of fringe belts. In this light, a quotation from the last chapter by Nicola Marzot is noteworthy, claiming that urban fringes are by definition temporary conditions.

**Order without design. How markets shape cities** by *Alain Bertaud*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018, 413 pp. ISBN 9780262038768. The title of this book is provocative for those working with cities and trying to understand how urban form creates conditions for, amongst many other things, markets. Nevertheless, the book is worth reading, but one must keep in mind Alain Bertaud’s view on ‘cities as labour markets’. Planners, he writes, are idealists with little knowledge about markets, while economists have models to understand markets and thus cities. The book turns at times into a guidebook on how to oil the machinery to make cities work better as markets. It leaves unmentioned the other objective of planning, namely, in the words of Bertaud, to control the market to increase the welfare of citizens. Nevertheless, there are many interesting points raised in this book and lessons to be learned. The two most important are, first, the role of infrastructure in planning and, secondly, the role and potential misuse of regulation in planning. Chapter 2 gives an introduction to cities as labour markets, raising the importance of infrastructure is raised. This is further elaborated in Chapters 3 and 5, where Bertaud discusses the crucial role that planning plays. Besides infrastructure and mobility, density and land use are discussed extensively. Here the main message is that these are factors to be left to the market or at the most, be regulated to reduce negative externalities. Chapter 4 raises the role of masterplans and questions the current static approach in which a spatial blueprint is provided for the development of cities every fifth or tenth year instead of a monitoring approach using indicators to guide development in real time. This is further elaborated in Chapter 8 where the concept of blinking indicators is introduced to warn about problems before they become too acute.

**The new Arab urban. Gulf cities of wealth, ambition, and distress** edited by *Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini*, New York University Press, New York, USA, 2019, 339 pp. ISBN 9781479897254. This book is about learning from the cities of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the most controversial and dynamic ones. Like the now classic *Learning from Las Vegas*, it aims to go beyond seeing the tasteless and aberrant. The editors do this by not only stressing the distinctions, with the aim to ‘de-exceptionalize’ Gulf cities, but also to discuss notions that are common to other human settlements. In relation to the book *Order without Design*, reviewed in this issue of *Urban Morphology*, an interesting finding presented is that economic models lose explanatory power in Gulf cities. Chapters 1–3 present the history of Gulf cities and what is or is not authentically ‘Arab’, where the positioning of these cities in the world is key and for which leading world architects and planners are flown in to design the Arab city. Chapters 4–6 discuss the roles of client and consultant where the consultant is, in many cases, not from the Arab world. This professional amalgamation is discussed using various examples, such as the European piazza that was copied despite the realities of extreme heat and gender segregation. It is a shame that no images or maps are provided to show the material outcomes of what is described in the book as ‘transnational design’. Chapters 7–9 discuss the Gulf as a test-bed. Because of the implementation speed of new ideas such as the zero-carbon Masdar City project discussed in chapter 8, Gulf experiences can provide important lessons about accomplishments, and shortcomings or failures. The last chapters discuss some of these downsides of the Gulf planning model in more detail. These include continuous displacement of people and the imposition of a fragmented urban form, aiming at deliberate inclusion and exclusion. The editors remind us that this is not solely an Arab phenomenon.

**Shrinking cities in China. The other facet of urbanization** edited by *Ying Long and Shuqi Gao*, The Urban Book Series, Springer Nature, Singapore, 2019, 256 pp. ISBN 978–981–13–2645–5. The topic of shrinking cities in China might, for some, come as a surprise, because China is more often associated with expanding

cities and booming economies. However, in the first chapter, the editors identify 180 shrinking cities out of 653 cities suffering from out-migration, in contrast to the overwhelming in-migration to megacities. Various types of shrinking cities are discussed that are different from their European or US counterparts. While the spatial pattern of US shrinking cities is, for instance, conceptualised as doughnut, ‘hollowing out inner-city and a ring of booming suburb’, the Chinese pattern is reversed, showing a more homogeneous spatial population shrinkage. The first chapter further discusses the mismatch between the reality of shrinking cities and growth-oriented planning. Only recently have scholars called for a paradigm shift towards rightsizing. The book is divided into four parts, in which the first covers the introduction; the second discusses regional differences in China; the third takes up more specific topics related to shrinking cities; and the fourth focuses on the image of shrinking cities through photographs and more anecdotal evidence. The conundrums in the whole book are the discrepancies between the idea of growth of Chinese cities despite many shrinking cities; the simultaneous process of population shrinkage and economic growth; and planning for growth in shrinking cities. Chapter 8 deviates from the other chapters, focusing on the scale of the street, while all other chapters discuss cities in terms of administrative units. Moreover, this chapter poses a hypothesis of the lagging of population decline, economic decline and loss of quality of the built environment. That quality in the earlier stages of shrinkage increases is explained by capital investments seeking to fight economic decline despite population loss. This, at first sight odd, chapter is therefore highly interesting with clear parallels to *Dream city* (reviewed in this issue of *Urban Morphology*).

**Cities made of boundaries. Mapping social life in urban form** by *Benjamin N. Vis*, UCL Press, London, UK, 2018, 398 pp. ISBN 978–1–78735–107–3. This book aims to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between society and space, an ambitious endeavour. Vis takes on this challenge by, first, developing a theoretical framework (Chapter 3) where he depicts ‘boundaries’ as key variables of the built environment and, secondly, proposing an ontology of

boundary-line types, BLT (Chapter 5). In Chapter 7, this is operationalized and demonstrated in two contrasting case studies. This comparative analysis aims to supply the evidence base that informs us about the mechanisms of how cities function socially. Boundaries are important because they are the key to differentiation that, following Vis's argument, allows the 'process of inhabitation' to take place. This is the main message of the book: cities are not about entities, but boundaries! Chapter 2–4, step-by-step, introduce this statement, and Chapter 5 presents the ontology of boundary line types, composed of 13 definitions, each described on three levels: boundaries as personal territory creating distance and proximity (dimensional context); boundaries regulating relationships in time and space (locational context); and boundaries creating entities (aggregative context). Vis positions his ontology of boundaries in relation to other urban morphological approaches such as Conzen's town plan analysis and space syntax. These sections are, however, rather shallow in comparison to the more philosophical discussion of the first chapters. Starting from Chapter 7, the empirical process of mapping BLT is explained. Here the reader literally drowns in details and, unfortunately, the concluding chapter does not reward the reader by delivering what was aimed at, a better understanding of the relationship between society and space.

**Morphological research of the historical urban boundary. The inner fringe area of Nanjing** by *Jiang Lei*, Traditional Morphologies Joint Research Unit, Southeast University – Politecnico di Torino, Nanjing, China/Torino, Italy, 2019, 195 pp. ISBN 979–12–200–4974–0. This small-format book originates in the author's Turin-based PhD thesis of 2016–7, and it is welcome that good-quality

theses can receive some wider circulation. The Traditional Morphologies Joint Research Unit is to be commended for this, and support from Southeast University and the Chinese Ministry of Education certainly helps. The book is structured in four main parts, each with its own bibliography. The first part is extremely brief, and simply sets the context for morphological research and its relationship with urban history and culture. The second part explores the Chinese context for morphological research, including consideration of traditional cosmology and geomancy in urban layout, and the resources offered by both traditional and modern Chinese cartography. The third section identifies Nanjing's morphological periods and urban structure, in a conventional historical approach. The final section, perhaps the most interesting, analyses the city's current inner fringe. The book is profusely illustrated, although many are within the wide margins and, owing to the small format, all are relatively small. Unfortunately there are some typographical errors about which users will need to be aware, for example the transposition of digits in publication dates. Nevertheless this is a useful volume.

### Book Notes section

In addition to providing shorter notes on recent books, which does not preclude later full reviews in the journal, this section would also be very appropriate for carrying information about relevant doctoral theses, including their abstracts. Authors or supervisors of relevant theses are invited to provide details to the Book Review Editor, Meta Bergausser Pont, Chalmers University of Technology, Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, SE-412, 96 Gothenburg, Sweden. E-mail: meta.berghausserpont@chalmers.se.