



BOOK REVIEWS

Atlas of the Dutch urban block by *Susanne Komossa, Han Meyer, Max Risselada, Sabien Thomas and Nynke Jutten*, THOTH Publishers, Bussum, The Netherlands, 2005, 284 pp. ISBN 90-6868-382-9.

This atlas, which is anchored in typological and morphological research, explores one of the fundamental topics in the contemporary field of urban morphology, namely the dialectical relationship between the urban block and the fabric of the city. The atlas focuses on the Dutch urban block viewed as a 'reading unit' that reveals and reflects the grid and the fabric of the city, and shows its role in capturing urban morphological change over time.

A difficult question that underlies this work is whether the Dutch urban block has substantially changed or stayed the same over the course of the past four centuries. Much of the research done on cities, their elements and the structural units of the urban map starts from the assumption that with the modern movement there has been an irreparable split between the classic and the modern city, and that the loss of urbanity and urban qualities is connected with this break.

This book argues that this is only partially true and that in the Netherlands there has been a great deal of continuity from the seventeenth century ring canals to recent projects. In researching and explaining the changes that have affected the Dutch urban block in the past four centuries, the authors focused on Amsterdam and Rotterdam due to their similarities in size, land forms, and political and cultural development on the one hand, and their concentrated efforts to implement innovative projects, on the other.

One major virtue of this atlas lies in the manner in which the authors selected the nineteen projects, based on the hypothesis that each of these projects is a paradigm for a specific relation between urban plan typology and the urban block. More

specifically, the authors discuss and illustrate ten Amsterdam projects and nine Rotterdam projects. These range from the large-scale urban extension of the Amsterdam Ring Canals in the seventeenth century, to the urban expansions during the industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of the large urban blocks put in place after the Housing Act of 1890, and finally to the most recent ones, including the twentieth-century Java Island Amsterdam project and the twenty-first century Stadstuinen Rotterdam project.

Another virtue of this atlas lies in its concise, cohesive, standard form and presentation for each project, reflecting the authors' approach to both the urban block and the fabric of the city. For each project the authors briefly discuss the historical and cultural context in which it was shaped and document the overall continuity of the Dutch urban block by amply illustrating it with the aid of high-quality maps, drawings, cross-sections and photographs.

The authors managed to successfully document a great deal of continuity in the Dutch urban block by employing a project-by-project analysis and charting nineteen projects from 1615 onward using drawings of fragments of the city at a scale of 1:5000. The consistent use of drawings at this scale throughout the atlas allows the reader to understand and visualize the relationship between urban elements and the overall morphology.

This atlas reveals a clear, easy to follow two-tier structure centred on the presentation of nineteen Dutch projects in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and five relevant urban morphological essays addressing the urban tissue, dwelling types, urban block, mass housing and the drawing method.

The atlas starts with a concise introduction overviewing the authors' research goals, hypothesis, approach, and methodology, followed by Philippe Panerai's preface to the atlas which includes interesting thoughts on the development and evolution of urban fabric, the Dutch urban block viewed as a discrete urban unit, as well as on

the relationships between the urban block and the grid on the one hand, and the urban block and the plot on the other.

Based on both its original conceptual approach and clear graphic materials I warmly recommend the use of the *Atlas of the Dutch urban block* as a useful teaching and research tool in the fields of urban morphology, urban geography, urban planning, urban design, architecture and urban policy. I agree with the authors of this atlas that learning to read a map is an important element in the professional practice of architects and urban planners, and I might add in the study of urban form by undergraduate and graduate students. Furthermore, in addition to maps and drawings, this atlas also provides simple but important elements pertaining to dimensions, numbers, density and the average size of dwellings, which are useful in examining and understanding the characteristics and evolution of the urban block in particular and the urban fabric in general. Finally, for researchers and decision-makers, this atlas can be used as a reference work that assembles plans and information otherwise difficult to gather.

This book is very well designed and illustrated and offers important insights into understanding how urban change or urban continuity can be captured via 'reading' the morphological and chronological evolution of the urban block. It is clearly an important contribution to the field of urban morphology in general and urban morphological analysis at the urban block level in particular.

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The form of cities: political economy and urban design by Alexander R. Cuthbert, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2006, 304 pp. ISBN 1-4051-1640-4.

In *The form of cities: political economy and urban design*, Alexander Cuthbert has entered into an effective and multi-faceted dialogue with his own previous edited work, *Designing cities: critical readings in urban design*. (Yet another facet of this dialogue is contained in the longer version of Chapter 1 available on Cuthbert's faculty website at the University of New South Wales under the

'publications' heading). Both books are organized into the same ten parts: theory, history, philosophy, politics, culture, gender, environment, aesthetics, typologies and pragmatics. But whereas *Designing cities* is an anthology of 30 previously-published works by different authors, *The form of cities* is Cuthbert's effort to synthesize those and numerous other works within their theoretical and methodological contexts. As such, it reads as a broad survey of recent social theory in the context of the production of urban form.

Cuthbert's training in architecture, planning and economics and his subsequent years of experience in the design field are evident here in a wide-ranging exploration of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the production of urban form. His discussion moves beyond the classic canon of urban design to tackle such philosophical issues as 'what is history?' and 'what is sustainable development?' And his conceptualization of urban form is multifaceted, encompassing, integrating and contrasting 'forms' from the physical to the philosophical. Within these diverse discussions, however, he rarely strays far from the theme of 'political economy and urban design' with which he subtitled the book. In this perspective, urban form, in all its manifestations, is produced and co-produced through the dynamics, structures, and exercises of power in the political, legal, economic, social and cultural realms.

Each chapter of the book lays out a set of diverse ways urbanists, social theorists and other academics have approached its central theme. The first chapter, entitled 'Theory', surveys 'mainstream' urban design theory, political economy, and critical theory. A table and accompanying discussion portrays the different ways in which the fields of architecture, urban design, and urban planning have tended to view and/or operationalize different elements of the urban, including structure, environment, resources, objectives and behaviour. The theory chapter is concluded with a sharp critique, noting that the 'cult of the individual architect' has influenced urban design theory to a striking degree, so that the conceptualizations of urban form embodied in the theoretical literature tend to be unrelated, singular, and devoid of a basis in socio-economic and political practice.

The chapter on history, after a foray into the general theories of 'what is history?' focuses on an organizational scheme for the literature on urban history and change which centres on five types: chronologies, typologies, utopias, fragments, and materialist theory.

Cuthbert uses individual cities and the 'schools