



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Os elementos urbanos**, edited by *Carlos Duas Coelho*, Argumentum, Edições Estudos e Realizações, Lisboa, Portugal, 2013, 205pp. ISBN 978-972-8479-78-7.

This collection of essays on urban form in Portugal is comprised of nine chapters, by different authors. The topics covered are the urban fabric, the impact of topography, urban grids, the square and street, the city block, the plot, and specialized and ordinary building types. The book has three objectives, all of which are successfully met. First, it is a pedagogical reference with case studies and examples explaining the concept, formation and transformation of various urban components. Secondly, it delivers its arguments with clarity through a combination of texts, drawings and photographs. Thirdly, the graphic design serves admirably the previous two goals, with clever use of a highlight colour with black and white print in an elegant, affordable and practical format. However, a larger format would have been ideal, to maximize appreciation of the fine drawings.

This is a delightful book: the type of apparently modest work that tells readers so much about what they were perhaps suspecting. It reveals the remarkable Portuguese urban landscape, rich in composition, diverse in its components, yet consistent in providing a general sense of order and hierarchy combined with great attention to details and materials. *Os elementos urbanos* provides keys to understanding the subtle shift from the morphological design principle to the material nature of urban space and the architectural project.

The different essays draw upon larger studies, all of which are referenced in notes at the ends of chapters. Each author makes clear the international literature, both theoretical and historical, that situates the Portuguese urban heritage in a larger Western context. The examples discussed demonstrate the singular design process over time. One

recurrent graphic clue developed from one essay to another is the comparison of the morphological findings of the Portuguese case studies with the ideal, or conceptual model to which the existing urban form relates. Such a device underlines the necessary interpretation that comes with the implementation and completion of a project – a fundamental observation for academics, professionals and the general public.

The first two chapters illustrate the impact of topography on the planning and design of the urban fabric, indirectly underlining the recurrence of hilly sites. Chapter 3 presents the urban design pattern of the medieval new town: the urban fabric and plot characteristics evoke the urban code implemented in the wave of New Urbanism.

Chapter 4 delves into the city squares to explore the evolution of a traditional urban form in the past two centuries. It offers examples, at the urban scale, of a more ‘regular’ shape, and the evolving urban design of the open space. Both the third and fourth chapters make a point of the importance of the built heritage and its contribution to the experience of the city. The chapter on the street introduces an interesting argument concerning street designation, topography and street design. North American cities commonly use streets, avenues and boulevards as abstract labels referring to an alleged hierarchy rarely experienced on site. The Portuguese language on the other hand offers an extended lexicon for naming specific conditions relating to the site and the intended experience, suggesting an elaborate culture of space, city and geography.

The last four chapters make the transition from the urban to the architectural scale. The large urban block (*o quarteirão*), typical of modern city planning, presents a set of large housing projects built after 1945. These are cases for the modernization of urban form and lifestyle, regardless of the political rhetoric of the then regime. The chapter

on the plot (*a parcela*) presents two cases of national road development under the contemporary pressure of urban sprawl. Chapter 8 considers a number of ambitious projects, some completed and others only partially so, that present cases for the transition from design principle to built form. The final chapter explores tenements in Lisbon. It is arguably a little short considering the extensive prevalence of tenements following the 1755 earthquake. It presents three main types and their relationship to the urban block and the street. The detailed interior floor plans, and the underlined components highlight both recurring and changing features in residential design.

This book is an outcome of a much larger research project on the urban morphology of the Portuguese city. It compliments an exceptional book on the urban square *A praça em Portugal: inventário de espaço público* by the same author, published in 2007. Three other books still to come are on the evolution of urban form (*O tempo e a forma*), the city's representation and assessment from different viewpoints (*Outros abordagens*), and concepts and methodologies for morphological research implemented in Portugal (*Conceitos e metodologias*).

*Os elementos urbanos* is a useful reference even if one's ability to read or decipher the Portuguese language is minimal. It provides a model for morphological analysis, from an understanding of the wide range of influences and models inspiring urban and architectural concepts to the implementation of projects under local conditions in which space, time and culture are critical.

François Dufaux, École d'architecture, Université Laval, 1, Côte de la fabrique, Québec G1R 3V6, Québec, Canada. Email: francois.dufaux@arc.ulaval.ca

**The Chinese city** by Weiping Wu and Piper Gaubatz, Routledge, London, UK, 2013, 298 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-57574-4 (hbk), 978-0-415-57575-1 (pbk), 978-0-203-85447-1 (ebk).

Chinese cities have undergone rapid growth and change in the last 30 years. The unprecedented urban transformation has been underpinned by rural-urban migration, economic globalization, changes in the urban administrative systems, urban spatial reorganization through land-use change, and

suburbanization associated with new housing development. The increasing tensions between equality and efficiency, power and democracy, and economic development and urban ecology and social welfare, are particularly evident in contemporary Chinese cities. Not surprisingly, the new challenges for the understanding and management of urban development have stimulated the rapid growth of research on Chinese cities both in China itself and in other parts of the world.

Published books that focus on the Chinese city are related to a wide range of academic interests and topics. They include urban political economy (Logon, 2002; Zhu, 1999; Wu *et al.*, 2013), land-use reforms and housing commercialization (Ding and Song, 2005; Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010), urban planning principles and practice (Sit, 1995) and the historical development of Chinese cities (Xu, 2000). However, widely-inclusive and up-to-date publications that can be used as textbooks for courses on urban China have been particularly rare. Weiping Wu and Piper Gaubatz's book, *The Chinese city* aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic study that can serve as a basic textbook for teaching urban China in programmes of geography, planning and environmental studies. This book not only makes a timely contribution to the provision of teaching materials, but also offers critical perspectives on the urbanization process in China against a backdrop of urban theories developed elsewhere in the world.

The book is divided into four parts including a total of thirteen chapters. Part 1 describes China's geographical environment, historical urban system and traditional urban forms. Part 2 focuses on the urban system since 1949, the rural-urban divide and migration, and interactions with the global economy. Part 3 outlines the specific sectors of urban development, including economic restructuring, social-spatial transformation, urban infrastructure, and urban land and housing. Part 4 showcases urbanism through the lens of the urban environment, lifestyle and social change, and urban governance. Central to the book is the examination in a historico-geographical context of how current social and economic development is transforming the fundamental nature and structure of Chinese cities. Arguably this is the most comprehensive and integrated coverage so far in the English language of modern changes to Chinese cities and their relationship to earlier urban development.

A number of chapters are of particular interest to urban morphologists in that they are more concerned with the physical aspect of cities, and the linkages between culture, ideology and economy