

Historicity and urban form in the digital era

Managing change is key to much human endeavour, not least for researchers and practitioners with an especial concern for urban environments. It presents a particular challenge for urban morphologists seeking to reconcile the conflicting requirements of conservation and change. A similar inherent dilemma was long ago recognized in many fields, though it only entered wider consciousness in the course of the industrial era. Attempts to address the challenge on the whole came slowly among those researching on cities, despite the major, often indiscriminate changes that occurred in the urban landscapes of sizeable parts of the Western world. As we move further into what for many is the post-industrial era, it is important to take stock of the implications for the future physiognomies of cities of the relatively new world of digital communication. For urban morphologists a significant concern must surely be to consider developments within this changing environment in relation to the longterm social and cultural significance of historical urban landscapes.

The huge growth in electronic communication has predictably attracted much speculation about the future of cities. Many writers have turned to the latest geographical data, inter- and intra-urban, to detect recent tendencies that might provide clues, for example to the future configuration and density of urban areas. Batty (2013) underlines the difficulty of forecasting the future physical form of cities. Seeking lessons for urban form and planning from a review of some 100 English-language publications, Maeng and Nedović-Budić (2008) conclude that urban planning researchers are only starting to understand the relationship between Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and urban form. There has been much discussion of the extent to which cities are deconcentrating (Audirac, 2005), though Batty (2013) reminds us that there is recent evidence of the opposite tendency.

In comparison, little research has been undertaken that sheds light on the implications of the electronic era for the sorts of aspects of urban form that have engaged the interest of many contributors to this journal. The extensive writing and speculation about cities with particular reference to ICT is overwhelmingly about gross urban form: it is especially about the broad configurations and densities of large urban areas. There have been far fewer speculations on the future physical make-up of cities at the finer grain at which they are observable on the ground. Discussion of what the various parts of cities might actually be like in their layouts and physical structures is lagging well behind.

In assessing the factors that should be taken into account in such inherently morphological matters at the intra-urban scale, the historicity or historical expressiveness of urban landscapes merits particular attention. Its importance and how it might be approached within urban planning was addressed half a century ago by M. R. G. Conzen. He observed the difficulty that British society was having, in the cultural crises of the early post-war decades, 'to keep its sense of continuity and its capacity to see things interconnected', a problem reflected in uncertainty in the grasp of long-term values (Conzen, 1966, p. 56). He stressed the importance of a physical environment of the fullest possible historical expressiveness in enabling the individual to take root in an area, demonstrating the historical dimension of human experience and thereby stimulating comparison and through it a more informed way of reasoning (Conzen, 1966, p. 59). This remains just as apposite to the cultural crises faced by much of the world today. Conzen (1966, p. 61) argued that 'in a democratic society the state of the cultural landscape and in particular the preservation or neglect of its historicity reflects closely the average cultural consciousness of that society and thus indirectly the long-term efficiency of its education system'. He expounded the case for giving high priority to historicity and went on to set out a method whereby it could be incorporated into urban planning. Where does such a perspective fit today in relation to the different conditions of the digital era?

A common presumption is that physical change will accelerate inexorably. It would appear to have support in recent history, particularly that of the industrial era. However, the advent of digital environments has changed the relationship between technological change and urban form. Urban landscape change is less a concomitant of technological change than it was in the industrial era. The digital era provides choices on an unprecedented scale, including choices about conserving or not conserving urban landscape legacies. We may castigate our industrial forebears for their landscape vandalism, but we need also to recognize that the technological driving forces of that time were so different. The digital era offers far greater opportunities to conserve. But, as Conzen was abundantly aware, the extent to which such opportunities are taken depends especially on cultural consciousness. In particular it depends on recognition of urban landscapes as historically composite records of places – an attribute that is so important in allowing individuals to locate themselves simultaneously in time and space. In the current preoccupation with economic problems and the need in many areas to accommodate growing urban populations and

expanding urban functions there is a significant risk of losing sight of the long-term cultural value of urban landscapes. Yet this asset may well become more rather than less important as the digital era unfolds. And in expounding it urban morphologists have a key role.

References

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