

### How we view cities: a green-space enigma?

In the early years of this journal, Lee (1999) drew attention to the concern of English urban morphologists with the form of buildings and their relative neglect of spaces. He might well have extended this generalization more widely to Western urban morphologists, or at least large sections of this diverse group. He contrasted this concern with buildings with the tendency in Korea to focus on the characteristics of space. He illustrated this in a simple way by referring to the case of an extension to a house and how this could be seen as a change in building form and building coverage, the English perspective, or as a change in the characteristics of space, in this case the garden, the perspective prevalent in Korea.

Nearly 20 years on, a focus on physical structures, rather than the spaces within which structures exist, continues to be prevalent in much urban morphological research. Yet a feature of research on urban areas more generally in recent decades has been the growth of interest in spaces, notably green spaces. This has matched, and in some respects presaged, the related interest in green spaces outside academe.

Not surprisingly, studies of urban green space are most numerous in research fields closest to the biosciences, notably ecology. The findings are variable in their basis and therefore in their comparability. And they frequently fail to distinguish between significantly different types of green space, such as on the one hand private-house gardens and, on the other, green spaces of quite different configuration and access, such as public parks, sports grounds, cemeteries, and the grounds of institutions. However, they do suggest the existence of enormous variations in the proportion of the areas of cities that are green space, ranging in Europe from as high as practically one-half at one extreme to tiny percentages at the other (Fuller and Gaston, 2009). Elsewhere in the world, the fact that Chinese cities on average have much less green space than American ones (Chi *et al.*, 2015) will

come as no surprise to urbanists with a comparative international perspective.

Less familiar to those relatively few urban morphologists whose research has taken them into or close to green-space study is the way in which the research by those in other fields of knowledge is structured when intra-urban distributions are considered. Most obvious, and counter-intuitive to many urban morphologists with historico-geographical predilections, is the analysis of urban areas in terms of zones or units based on geometrical regularities. Among these are equidistant concentric zones around urban cores (Zhou and Wang, 2011). While these reveal gross centre-periphery differences, they yield little information on how the incidence of different spaces, such as green spaces, or the pattern of hard and soft surfaces, relates to the configuration of the city as a product of historical periods with widely varying expressions on the ground.

The limited concern for the historical growth structure of the form of cities is also evident in urban design and planning. Green spaces are for the most part treated as individual entities rather than in relation to one another, albeit that their areal extent by type or collectively may be expressed as an aggregate within an administrative area. Among the rare exceptions are those that form 'greenways'. But even in the case of the very small minority of these that survive as historical markers, notably associated with city walls, the weight attributed to them in planning and design tends to be small (Jim and Chen, 2003).

This shortcoming in how space is viewed is a challenge for urban morphologists. It is also one of a number of opportunities that exist for building bridges, most obviously to neighbouring fields of knowledge. In the present context, there is scope for building upon and promulgating historico-geographical concepts such as the morphological period and the fringe belt (Conzen, 1960). These bring realism not only to concentric zonal

interpretations of development around urban cores but also to other urban configurations. Though the growth of a good many cities is indeed broadly concentric around an initial core, much less evident in research and practice hitherto has been wider appreciation of the fact that what is created on the ground reflects the spasmodic way in which cities grow. The historical record is one in which periods of outward expansion of the mainly residential built-up area alternate with periods of relatively little residential building. During the latter, more extensive spaces, notably green spaces, form fringe belts at or a little beyond the urban fringe and later become embedded within the urban area in subsequent urban expansion. The zones of mostly low-intensity land use that tend to be created in this way have a significant role. Not least they give grain and intelligibility to the urban area. This is important for both comprehending distributions such as those of green spaces (Hopkins, 2012) and providing a framework that can contribute to decision-making on such matters as redevelopment and conservation.

This type of argument is far from new in relation to the morphological differentiation of urban areas (Conzen, 1966). And the example of green spaces considered here is just one of many that could be cited at interfaces between disciplines and between research and practice. The fact that the general problem of which a particular example is addressed here is in need of reiterating reflects the remarkably enduring resistance that so many researchers have to moving outside their customary intellectual patches. At most boundaries between disciplines the problem tends to be two-way. However, many would argue that urban morphology as a field of knowledge is inherently interdisciplinary and therefore particularly well placed to provide integrative approaches. The scope within it for exploring a variety of disciplinary approaches, and their inter-relationships, is considerable, albeit too often insufficiently recognized. This journal thrives on this scope and welcomes contributions accordingly.

The comparatively little attention that urban morphologists have given to green space at

a time when it has attracted increased attention quite widely is perhaps something of an enigma. This has become more apparent as researchers in other fields have brought to light increased evidence of the physical extent and environmental importance of green space in cities in many parts of the world. But the fact that this work by others has largely ignored the historico-geographical patterns of green space within urban areas, notably those aspects relating to the unevenness with which cities have grown, needs to be rectified. Whether or not this is an enigma, there is an issue to be addressed.

## References

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