Foreword: ‘Urban transformations: A history of design ideas’


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It is interesting to consider how it is possible to write everything that needs to be said about some subjects in a relatively short period of time, whilst other topics can so preoccupy the mind that it becomes possible to keep improving on the same paper for the whole of one’s life. Thus, the paper on Dickens and Ackroyd was conceived of, researched and written over a relatively short period of about six weeks; yet I began to craft Urban Transformations during the period 1976-8, whilst I was employed as a Research Assistant in the Unit for Architectural Studies at the Bartlett working with Bill Hillier on the foundations of space syntax analysis, and I continued to work on the paper sporadically throughout the next twenty years.

This could, in part, be to do with the subject matter, as the task of designing a residential environment suitable for an entire community poses major challenges for the architectural imagination. It is partly a product of local geography, for the Somers Town area of North London lies only a stone’s throw away from the old Bartlett building on Gordon Street, so we developed the habit of walking around the area to contemplate the design complexity of the real world. It is also to do with the evolution of space syntax itself, as the area comprises, in miniature, housing morphologies that are representative of just about every era from the past one hundred and fifty years, so it proved an ideal test bed for our evolving space syntax techniques.

However, another reason why I have revisited the design of urban housing again and again, has to do with the changing nature of urban society, its government and institutions, including three major attempts by the state to reshape housing policy for ordinary working people. The first, a product of Modernism between the 1950s and the 1970s, began with post-war reconstruction and ended with Thatchersim. As a student, I participated in a major international, RIBA-sponsored conference on the design of mass housing that included a study tour of the (then) highlights amongst a plethora of newly completed, innovative housing projects in inner London. The Marquess Road Estate, later to become a paradigm case study for space syntax, was on the agenda! At about the same time, like many of the aspiring architectural high-flyers of the day, I entered a housing design competition for the redevelopment of a site at Royal Mint Square, near the Tower of London. These experiences convinced me that I needed to know much more about the social consequences of architecture before I began to practise as an architect, hence my application to study on the M.Sc. in Advanced Architectural Studies (AAS) at the Bartlett, UCL.

I gained my Diploma in Architecture just in time to be on the receiving end of over a decade of vituperative criticism directed at architects and planners by the media and by politicians of all persuasions, about their patently unsuccessful attempts to produce ‘community by design’. My M.Sc. thesis identified just one possible reason why the early promise of much modern housing had failed to materialise over the course of time, which was that the architectural gesture of turning away from the surroundings of a newly-designed housing project in order to orientate the housing around a central ‘village green’, a move that was intended to represent the beating social heart of the community of new residents, seemed to achieve the opposite outcome of driving people apart. My thesis suggested that to equate ‘living in the round’ with a natural and unselfconscious expression of community was a misrepresentation of the archeological
and anthropological record. The paper on Urban Transformations represents a more considered explanation of the process behind these unexpected social consequences.

That gesture of ‘turning inwards’ in order to reinforce an emerging community spirit, was set to recur in various guides in subsequent decades of housing design. It emerged among spurious principles derived from a mythologised rural past and invented by the Postmodern ‘new urban villages’ movement, which took as its paradigm demonstration project Krier’s (1984) development at Poundbury, an extension to Dorset’s county town, Dorchester for the Duchy of Cornwall. Despite their emphasis on walkability, connectivity and diversity, the idea of building around a central community core has also informed the ‘sustainable’ design principles of ‘new urbanism’ that has become popular during the opening decade of this century (Calthorpe, 1993). A good test of an architectural theory is whether it has anything significant to say about important design issues of the day, and in this respect some of the early representations originated by space syntax would seem to have as much to contribute to the discourse and practice of housing design as the more recent ones, perhaps because the earlier approaches were not computer-generated but driven by what it is possible to see and draw directly; that is, by making translations, in this case from buildings to drawings (Evans, 1997), in ways that are fundamental to the discipline of architecture.

It is surprising how little in life is wasted. It is a characteristic of the human mind that we use every experience to build on. Who would have thought that a study of the design of European zoological gardens, undertaken with a Lovell Memorial Scholarship whilst I was still an architectural student during the summer of 1974, would eventually lead to a suggestion about the source of the underpinning principles of twentieth century social housing morphologies? It is both a tragedy and a triumph of the human condition that we experience life forwards, but understand it backwards so that, on reflection, experiences that seemed unpromising at the time have eventually led to something fresh and original.

References
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**ABSTRACT**

“One superordinate question facing planners today is integration versus segregation”

This paper explores some configurational ideas that were first put together during the late 1970s, whilst ‘space syntax’ was still in gestation. They are part of a larger project to use space syntax analysis to retrieve a structured history of design ideas. Through the study of samples of real cases, the ability of space syntax to extract common ‘genotypical’ themes or ‘design paradigms’ from the built record will be used to show the shift in design paradigms over time. The ultimate goal will be to link these paradigm shifts into an account of changing social ideas.

The case study that will be presented in detail will examine the morphological changes that have taken place in the design of housing in a small Inner London neighbourhood, Somers Town, over a timespan of about a hundred years. In essence, the change is from ‘streets’, which seem rather similar to one another, to housing ‘estates’, which seem very different from one another. Yet although the various housing schemes that have been studied in detail look very heterogeneous, it is possible to detect a consistent line of development in their spatial layouts that is so strong and generic as to be genotypical. It will be argued that the origins of this genotype can be traced back to assumptions about social class, gender and ethnicity that took many years to develop and which have now been obscured by more recent debates.

Architecture has moved on and now, in the UK at least, we try design things that are very different from the estate layouts of Somers Town. The paper will try to explain ‘how’ and ‘why’, by unfolding the story that lies behind the design ideas and by bringing it up to date. The argument will be consolidated in two ways; by providing a more complete and quantitative syntactic analysis of the 1970s examples, and by showing how the changes in the way we think about housing in the 1990s have had an impact on contemporary housing in Somers Town, and in what has become the paradigm for the latest generation of design ideas, Hulme in Manchester. Finally, it will be argued that it is essential for architects and urban designers to understand how social ideas about inequalities in power and control get built into our frameworks and assumptions, and why, in the final analysis, architecture cannot be divorced from politics.

The answer to Robert Sommer’s question “one superordinate question facing planners today is integration versus segregation” used to be thoroughgoing and uncompromising ‘segregation’; now it is ‘integration’. Today, permeability, integration and constitutedness are like ‘motherhood and apple pie’. As design principles, it is assumed that they can ‘do no wrong’. This ought to be a good thing for ‘space syntax’ since it was syntax that first drew attention to the importance of these properties in the first place. However, even if we grant that today’s political agenda has indeed changed for the better, unless designers and critics understand that all of these properties, even when applied at the neighbourhood scale, are global not local, there is a danger that, with the test of time, some of today’s radical, new designs might be judged to have ‘got it wrong’ once again, and that would be a disaster not only for the people who have to live there but also for architectural theory.
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