'Definite space, fuzzy chronology - the planning history of the 20C street revisited'

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Abstract

The street is a definite space but a strange category of object - void rather than solid. It is multifunctional: a public realm for trade, display, communication and social encounter; a channel for every kind of movement and a highway for vehicles; an architectural environment with distinctive aesthetic of enclosure, perspective and 'townscape'; an outdoor environment and part of the urban eco-system; a micro-climate with distinctive patterns of temperature, wind, sun and shade and humidity; a public infrastructure, a political economy in miniature with a unique combination of ownership and governance; a place with a name, address and identity - a locus of collective memory.

The standard chronology of 20C street history is a three-step 'Death and Life' narrative, based on the evolution of design theory, that sees it embraced by fin-de-siècle urbanism, rejected by the Modern Movement, rediscovered by postmodern urbanism. By reviewing this narrative from the perspective of the many distinct functions that streets perform, my paper reveals a fuzzy and overlapping chronology that puts both the death of the 20C street and its resurrection into question. The paper will also directly address the overall conference theme of the multiple governance of geographical space.

1. Introduction

The street is a definite space with fuzzy responsibility - a microcosm of our conference theme. Its *definiteness* is physical and unambiguous: streets are contained by the vertical frontages of the buildings that line them and give shape and character to their space - *Stadtraum* - the characteristic enclosed realm of urban public life. They are named and mapped and mostly outlast the buildings for which they provide an address, just as buildings tend to outlast their human occupants. The older a town, the greater the age of its streets. giving them historical as well as contemporary definition.

The *fuzziness* of streets derives from the multiple roles that they perform. A street is a multifunctional space: a public realm for trade, display, communication and social encounter; a channel for every kind of movement and a highway for vehicles; a way-leave for public infrastructure; an architectural setting with a distinctive aesthetic of enclosure, perspective and townscape; an outdoor environment and part of the urban eco-system; a micro-climate with distinctive patterns of temperature, wind, sun and shade and humidity; and a public realm and locus of collective memory. Each aspect involves different issues of policy and brings its own set of rules. So the street which is such a definite space is also a regulatory fuzz, a complex political economy of ownership, use and governance.

2. Biographies

Each street has an individual life-history beginning from the moment when its lines are first traced on the surface of the earth. Some streets have distant origins as farm-tracks or animal pathways, others are formed by state authority and laid out with the force of a military action, some are commercial ventures developed to create urban value for the plots that make up its frontage and provide its economic rationale, others again originate in the spontaneous actions of citizens, marking out sites for informal settlement.

Narratives of the life and times of individual streets are a fascinating literary genre, whether written from a perspective of fiction, history, geography or ethnography. Street biographies can also be told cartographically through maps and visually through photographs taken from a fixed vantage point, revealing the shifting balance between vehicles and pedestrians, and the changing relationship between building facades and the public realm. 'Double Vision', a recent exhibition of archival and contemporary photographs of the forcibly removed neighbourhood of South End in Port Elizabeth compiled by former resident Yusuf Agherdien, shows the impact of the 1950 Group Areas Act, before and after the forcible removal of residents from a culturally diverse neighbourhood to segregated townships, and the replacement of vibrant streets with highway landscapes and gated townhouse complexes for whites only.

3. The Grand Narrative

However, the focus of this paper is not on individual streets but on the overarching history of the street as a design type situated right at the heart of twentieth century urbanism. The paper follows a simple structure, first setting out a standard, definite narrative as it might be taught to first year undergraduate students, then introducing the qualifying factors that make it fuzzy.

The received narrative of the history of the street can be readily assembled from standard texts - Stephen Ward, Spiro Kostof, Jonathan Barnett. The narrative begins in the pre-1900 world of the 'traditional' street, a term that encompasses many differences while expressing a shared reality of movement by hoof and foot on public thoroughfares framed by the frontage private frontage. This immemorial typology undergoes four transitions in the short space of the twentieth century.

First at the turn of the century comes the concept of town planning or urbanism, implying the application of collective action and technical rationality to the ancient practices of the street. Joseph Stübben's *Der Städtebau* (1907), Eugen Fassbender's *Grundzüge der modernen Stadtbaukunde*

[Foundations of the Modern Science of Urban Planning] (1912), Raymond Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice: an introduction to the art of designing cities and suburbs* (1909), Nelson Lewis's *The Planning of the Modern City* (1916), John Nolen's *City Planning* (1916), Edouard Joyant's *Traité d'Urbanisme* (1923). Joyant provides a complete manual of street-building which begins with the dimensions of every major boulevard in France, and proceeds to explain the formation of blocks and the technique of parcelling land, controlling building alignment and height, and placing public buildings. Common to all these early texts of 20C urbanism is the idea of a progressive transformation of the attributes of 'traditional' urbanism.

What happened next was a true example of a paradigm shift. The Modern Movement rejected the assumption of continuity in urban design. Corbusier's *Urbanisme* of 1925 derides the corridor-street - the *rue-fissure* - as unwholesome and unworthy of twentieth-century man. Under his tutelage the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) develops and disseminates a theory of the streetless city, in which wheeled traffic moves freely on its own road hierarchy, architecture is liberated from the servitude of facades, and nature penetrates everywhere. Monumental towers, clean geometrical architecture, unornamented whitewash and iconic landscapes combine with a compelling verbal narrative of machine-age progress. State patronage in East and West Transforms drawings and maquettes into full-scale city-building experiments.

But around the mid-point of the century another dialectical shift occurs. Wartime destruction and the beginning of postwar urban clearances heightened younger modernists' awareness of the significance of the physical settings of everyday life, and the power of people's attachment to particular places and local identities. Aldo Van Eyck, Jacob Bakema, Louis Kahn, Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods and Alison and Peter Smithson broke away from CIAM and launched Team 10, shifting the emphasis from function to human association and quality of the everyday habitat. This generation reinstates the traditional street as object of emulation though their models of urbanity were no longer sought in boulevards but in the dense, picturesque, intimate environments of the casbah and the slum, the Italian hill-town, the Cornish fishing village. Separate but convergent movements for 'townscape' and for 'urban design' are launched in the postwar decade, and Gordon Cullen, Kevin Lynch, Edmund Bacon are among those who provide the necessary technique and terminology. It is a strange phase of design theory in which a fascination with the layout and human dynamics of the street finds physical expression in multi-level megastructures and pedestrian decks or in pocket parks under the lee of office towers. Writing in 1975, the best Shadrach Woods can hope for in *The Man in the Street: a Polemic on Urbanism* are street-like opportunities for pedestrianism and face-to-face encounter within a world of free-flow highway engineering and widely-spaced superblocks.

The fourth step in the dialectic takes urbanism full circle to address the agenda of modern living in a *rue-fissure*. As Nan Ellin shows in *Postmodern Urbanism* (1998) the return to the street originates in grassroots activism against the bulldozer in Paris, New York, Toronto, Brussels, Berlin, Barcelona. Community struggle against planned modernisation produces a considered defence of the conventional mixed street - the real thing, not the *ersatz* urbanism of Team 10. Using the powerful black-and-white simplicity of figure-ground maps, Aldo Rossi and Colin Rowe teach architects to 'forget architecture' and appreciate their role as urbanists, shaping space through the outer walls of buildings. Intellectuals such as Henri Lefebvre and Ed Berman find words to articulate the contribution of the street to political pluralism, cultural creativity, economic growth, and erotic possibility. Jane Jacobs and W H Whyte, in the distinctive tradition of American pragmatism, contribute micro-observations of layout and human behaviour in 'streets that work'. Whyte is also one of the first to articulate the economic rationale for street revival, that as the city lost industrial and commercial functions for which it was no longer competitive it would reassert its ancient role as the place where people come together face to face, human congress being 'the city's true export' (1988 341). So, revival of the street was supported from multiple perspectives. A planning theory based upon the shared public realm of central places harmonised equally with the emerging pattern of postmodern, x-generation life-style, and with growing awareness of CO2-induced climate change and the significance of the sustainability principle for transport and urban form.

By the last decade of the twentieth century we had arrived at a robust consensus around the principles of urban design. The mixed-use street was once again endorsed, indeed encouraged by official policy. The Blair government convened a Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers to promote the recovery of urban over suburban areas. Sir Peter Hall, who sat on the commission, spent the next decade demonstrating how the sustainable city was being realized in progressive urban projects around Europe, at Freiburg, in Stockholm's Hammarby Sjostadt, in the tram-based perimeter extensions to Dutch cities. All are street-based.

4. Towards a Conclusion

But here, in mid-May 2015, my paper ends on a note of incompletion. So far I have only described the definite. By the time we reach Prague in mid-July 2015 I will have added the fuzzy - which is the real point of the paper. Come and hear why the apparent consensus of the Urban Task Force has proved illusory, and why the clear-cut narrative we teach to first year undergraduates is alas mendacious.

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