

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Conzen's last bolt: reflections on *Thinking about urban form*

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Conzen, M.R.G. (2004) *Thinking about urban form: papers on urban morphology, 1932-1998*, ed. Conzen, M.P. (Peter Lang, Oxford, UK, 310 pp. ISBN 3-03910-276-1)

In the words of ISUF's President, M.R.G. Conzen was our 'most eminent member' (Moudon, 1999, p. 21). During his ninetieth year, 3 years before he died, he took part in the 1997 Fourth International Seminar on Urban Form in Birmingham where he announced to a plenary session 'I have not yet shot my bolt'. It was left to Michael Conzen to fulfil this pronouncement by assembling and editing a selection from his father's files. *Thinking about urban form* is a collection of writings, most of which are published for the first time, and the majority of which were written in the last 20 years of M.R.G. Conzen's life after his retirement from formal teaching.

A common problem with anthologies is that they can emerge as collections of unrelated papers. Michael Conzen has avoided this by assembling them under five thematic headings – geography as context for urban morphology, changing conceptual organization and content of geographical urban morphology, four case studies, a relatively short section on morphology and conservation, and a section on comparative and cross-cultural studies. He has contributed an introduction which links the fourteen chapters to the elder Conzen's evolving interests in the wider context of urban geographical scholarship. In addition, he has added four valuable appendices, a glossary of technical terms, an outline for an entry in a projected encyclopaedic dictionary of physical, human and regional geosciences, notes prepared in the 1990s on the development of

urban morphology as an interdisciplinary undertaking, a chronology of his career, a bibliography of his publications and a list of biographical and professional assessments of his work.

Conzen was the founding father of the modern British school of urban morphology so, as is normal in academic journals, one would expect a specialist from his discipline to be invited to review his work, i.e. one would expect a geographer to consider the work of this prominent member of their discipline. It is the special nature of ISUF that an architect has been invited to do this, a task that I undertake with some trepidation in relation to a body of work by a scholar who, in Michael Conzen's words, 'had a conviction that one should really know almost everything about a subject before having the temerity to write about it' (p. 11). This charge is therefore approached from the point of view of an architect and town planner, not a geographer – there are bus-loads of eminent geographers, many of whom are his former students, who could do that much more effectively.

#### The relevance of Conzen's work to practice

Much of the content of this volume has a direct application to planners and architects, but even those papers which are on apparently remote topics contain valuable insights that can help them in their everyday practice. For example Chapter 2, written in 1970, and never hitherto

published, was a response to the enormous influence of the quantitative school of anglophone geographers whose approach was the dominant orthodoxy in the contemporary academic discourse.

In his critique of an exclusive concern with functional organization as opposed to urban form, Conzen points out that historical, developmental, and cultural influences on settlement patterns had been overlooked 'as if history had no influence on them'. He then berates the 'ludicrous' application of Western conceptual models to areas of the world where they are historically, morphologically and, above all, functionally inappropriate because of the radically different socio-economic basis.

It is interesting to note the relevance of this paper to contemporary tendencies in urban planning. Although the systems planning textbooks of the 1960s have long been consigned to the shelves of the charity bookshops, at the time of the writing of Conzen's paper the concepts of systems analysis dominated planning academe in the anglophone countries. This was to the neglect of the physical aspects of planning even though the professionals still had to grapple with the everyday problems of development control, without any substantive arguments to help them devise policies or engage in debate with architects and their clients. Their academic colleagues were investing little effort into the investigation of form. For them, form was of minor importance so long as the social and economic context was right. Given the current popularity of urban design this may seem surprising, but those who experienced UK planning schools before the rediscovery of urban design in the mid-1970s will remember the contempt with which project work was held. It was only during the 1980s that the importance of the physical environment was generally recognized in constraining and promoting social and economic behaviour.

Conzen's intellectual rigour could have given many practitioners a basis for articulating and defending an alternative position to that so dominant at the time. Furthermore, had urban morphological concepts been in general circulation, perhaps

the antagonism between planners and architects might have been less acute. The confrontation would have been moved from a concern with the aesthetics of buildings, which architects see as their preserve and, therefore, resent the intrusion of another profession, to one concerned with the deeper and more enduring elements of the townscape.

### Conzen as a cultural bridge

Jeremy Whitehand has pointed out how ISUF is trying to rectify the dangers of anglophone squint in urban morphological studies (Whitehand, 2005). Again, this is in line with the work of Conzen who, for 60 years, offered a relatively painless way into the world of Central European geography. Most of the papers in this book offer access to the work of scholars working in German to those who do not read that language.

In the late 1960s, the systematic study of urban form was completely alien to British architectural and planning practice. So my introduction to the use of urban morphology as an operational tool by Italian architects was an exciting discovery. A decade later a geographer colleague revealed to me Conzen's work in Britain on the other side of the interdisciplinary iron curtain.

An attempt to make a link between the Italian, mainly Caniggian, work and the British work took place at a small seminar in the Department of Geography at the University of Birmingham in 1982. There a genealogy of morphology was presented (Figure 1). This tried to fit Conzen's work – it had not yet attained the appellation of a school – into a framework which included the urban design and architect protagonists of the rediscovery of the virtues of traditional urban forms. Conzen himself must have been aware of the similarities between his work and that of the Italian architects since his library includes the catalogue of an exhibition of the seminal Bologna plan (Commune di Bologna, 1970) and a copy of *La Città di Padova* (Aymonino, 1970), an important collection of papers by Aymonino, Rossi and others.

In Appendix C, which are the notes, edited

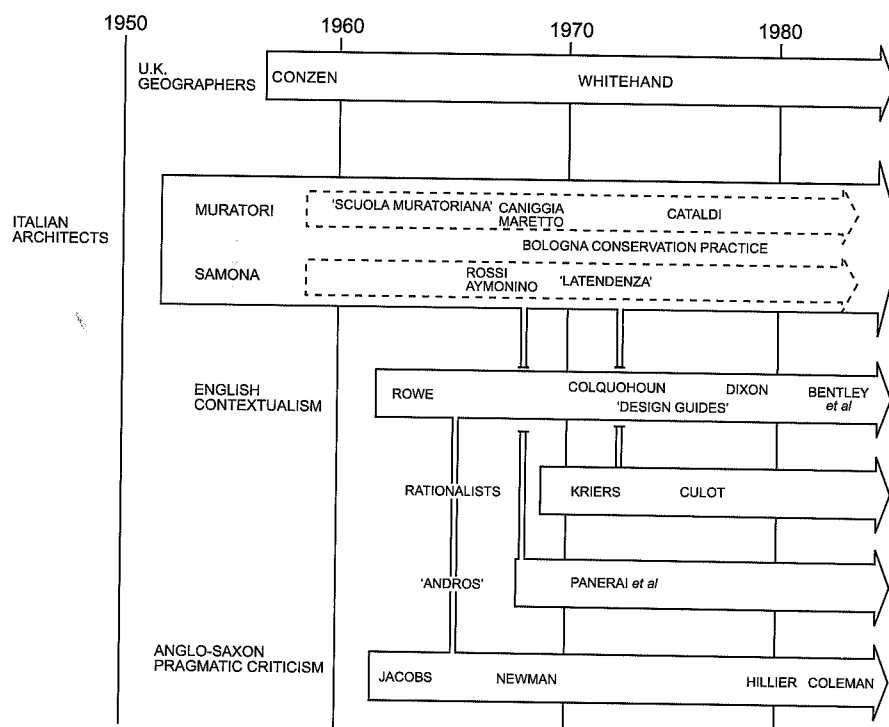


Figure 1. A genealogy of urban morphology, 1982 (from Samuels, 1982).

by Jeremy Whitehand, for a final major work on 'Urban morphology: its nature and development', there is a citation of the Muratorian school in the context of the links between urban morphology and architecture and architectural history. Although references in this section, especially the geographical citations, are mainly in German, Conzen points out (p. 276) that the 'word townscape is not of geographical origin but of architectural / urban planning origin (Gordon Cullen and Thomas Sharp)'. Inserted as a technical appendix, these pages are a remarkable summary of the author's wisdom and provide a valuable resource for future scholars (Figure 2).

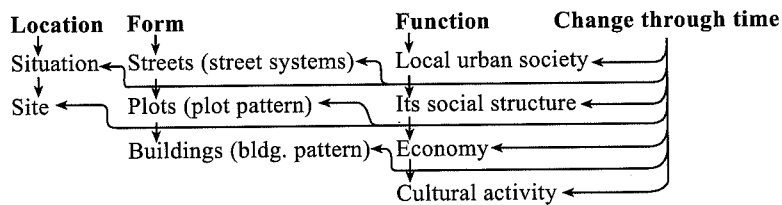
Twenty years after the first attempt to construct a genealogy, a return to traditional urban form and especially the rediscovery of the street has become the conventional wisdom of urban design practice and has been enshrined in official design policy and guidance. A revised genealogy has therefore to include a much broader range of protagonists (Figure 3).

Against this background Conzen's work considers a number of themes that are still of

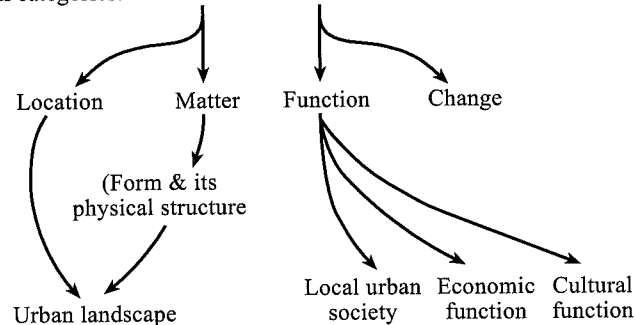
particular interest because they seem to be so central to architectural and urban design practice. The first of these is a preoccupation in all his work with the ordinary buildings which make up by far the greater part of our settlements. Then there is an interest in how our built environment changes and, above all, how different parts change at different rates. Third is the importance and practice of urban conservation; and finally there is the role of drawing as an exploratory tool. Within the pages of this volume there is so much useful wisdom on these themes that in addition to discussing them we have to try to explain the relative neglect of urban morphology in general and Conzen's ideas in particular in the planning and architectural professions. It must be emphasized that these observations relate to the UK and, to a lesser extent, the other anglophone countries. The different situation in other countries has already been noted.

### The importance of ordinary buildings

The greater part of our cities and towns is made up of housing. These are the ordinary

**Fundamental Ontological Categories: SPACE - TIME***Other (urban) ontological categories***URBAN ONTOLOGY:**

Fundamental categories: SPACE + TIME = 4-dimensional existence



**Figure 2. The four-dimensionality of the town as a geographical phenomenon (from the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).**

buildings which form the focus of urban morphologists' interest and greatly concern Conzen in this volume. They also make up the greater part of the architectural profession's activity. According to the latest 'Architects' Workload Survey' (Mirza and Stacey Research, 2005) in the first quarter of 2005 the combined value of private and public new housing commissions in the UK was £14 000 million, while the total value of new work in the remaining six sectors of offices, industrial, health, leisure, retail and education amounted to £9500 million. However, if we gauge the degree of interest in the different sectors by the way prizes are awarded, or the relative space devoted to them in the architectural press, then architects show relatively little interest in housing. Occasionally the weekly and monthly architectural journals publish special issues on this topic, but given the relative importance of the different building types, one would expect the special issues to be on the one-off buildings, not housing. The popular media, however, seem to have got the point – British television is flooded by programmes on

home improvement, house buying and selling and moving.

Architects' apparent neglect of their bread and butter, their prime source of income, starts when they are students. Courses usually focus on designing single artefacts: with a little care a student architect can navigate a 5-year programme in an architecture school without ever having to design ordinary housing, as opposed to a cliff-top house for a composer.

Although buildings were central to Conzen's approach to urban geography, he ventures few judgements on the quality of architecture or places. A notable exception is in his dissertation on the Havel towns (Conzen, 1932), excerpts from which are the earliest work included here. He criticizes the nineteenth century urban extensions, 'the later speculative period', as 'dreary and tiresome' while praising those of the 1920s and 1930s as beginning once again to reflect the 'utility, unity and beauty' of the medieval period. They are influenced by the need to consider the public realm and recognize 'the urban needs of the town community as a whole' (p.

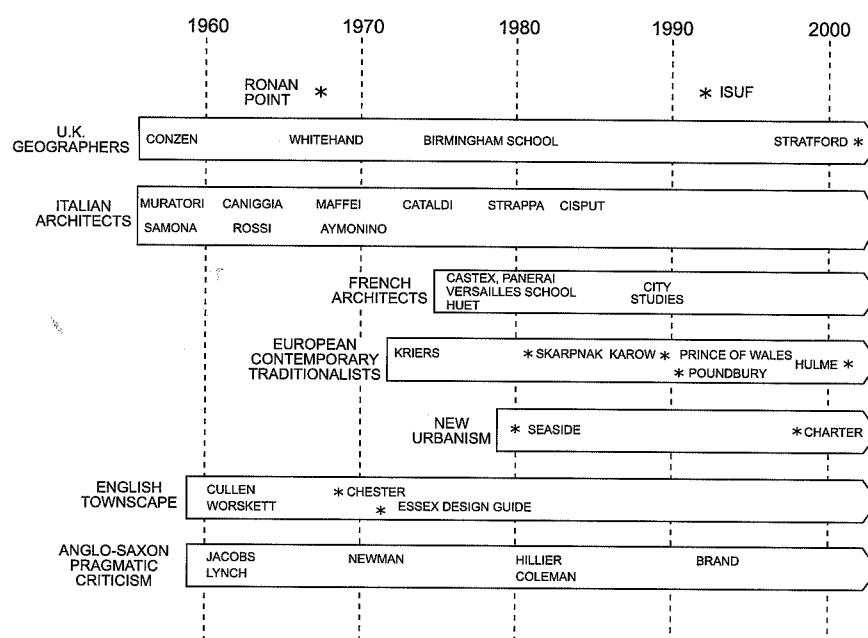


Figure 3. A genealogy of urban morphology, 2004 (from Samuels, 2004).

86). This is the young social democrat activist writing at a time when the Weimar Republic was producing new popular housing areas. In contrast to today's practice, when the most acclaimed architects hardly ever venture into the field of housing, they were being designed by Gropius, May and Sharoun, the architectural stars of the time. It is ironic that these were members of a movement whose intent, expressed by Le Corbusier, its most eminent member, was 'to kill the corridor street' – that component of urban form which was to be a major concern of Conzen's work.

### Cycles of change

Central to urban morphology is the concept of the cultural landscape as 'a kind of palimpsest, an accumulated, if partly erased and rewritten, record of human history in a place' (Conzen, p.151). This action of modifying and adapting the built environment is a significant part of an architect's work. The 'Architects' Workload Survey' (Mirza and Stacey Research, 2005) reports that for 2003 (the latest year for which figures are available) work on existing buildings accounted for 23 per cent of the total of new commissions in the UK. This was at

the peak of the economic cycle and even greater percentages obtain in times of reduced activity.

As with ordinary buildings, this field of activity is relatively neglected by the professional press and the educational system. In his book *How buildings learn*, Stewart Brand (1994) pointed out that a building's story only starts when the architect has finished with it. This book struck a chord at the time of its publication and even got translated into a television programme. The profile of building re-use also rose in the professional hit parade with such spectacular projects as the Tate Modern in London, but even this flurry of interest has not translated into a notably greater interest in the press or in the schools.

### The importance of drawing

The book is a revelation for the quality of Conzen's drawings, especially the reproductions from his excursion sketch books which are used as end-pieces for each chapter. They are in a variety of media; pencil sketches (Figure 4), careful topographical ink drawings (Figure 5), wood and linocuts (Figure 6), and



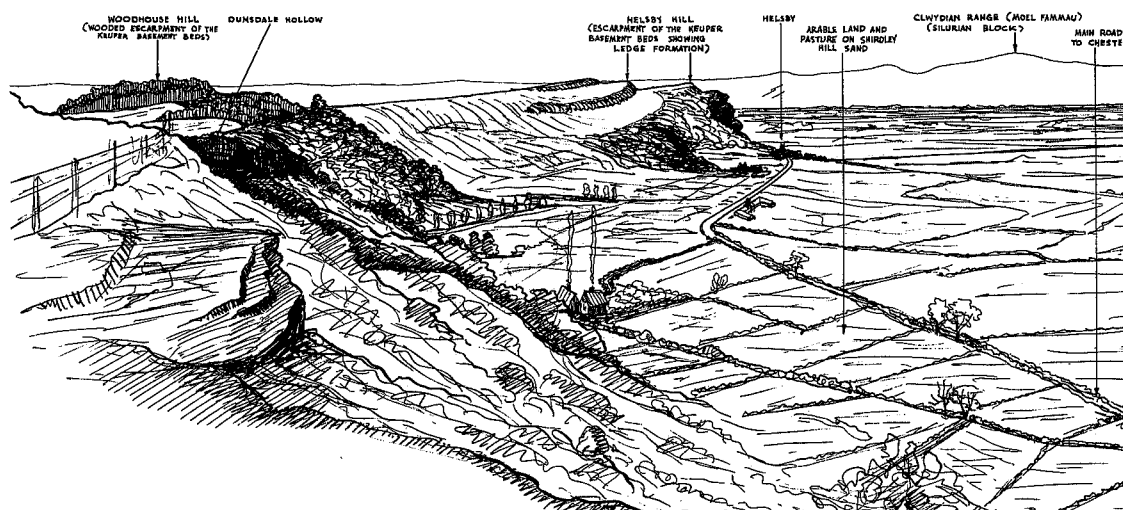
**Figure 4.** The Ploenlein, Rothenburg-ob-der-Tauber, Bavaria, c. 1926 (from MRGC Sketchbook, in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).

a watercolour reproduced on the book cover which has echoes of German Expressionism (a pencil drawing of the same design is reproduced in Figure 7). There are also a number of lively sketch plans of settlements

which contrast with the rather dry plans with which we are familiar from his publications (Figure 8).

The importance of the act of drawing plans is evident from the meticulous sheets retained in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection. These are the result of the painstaking fieldwork that he undertook personally. This contrasts with work of his near contemporary Saverio Muratori (1910-1973) whose seminal work on Venice was undertaken with massive student input from their project work. One is struck by the ability of Italian architectural teachers to persuade their students to undertake arduous tasks of data collection and drawing, whether plans of the Venetian urban tissue or of modern architects' own houses – anglophone students would have rebelled at this exploitation of unpaid labour!

It is reported that on the rare occasion that survey work was undertaken on his behalf by teams of students, Conzen, concerned that the data should meet his own high standards, would go and check it all for himself. Was this because he wanted to verify the results or because he needed to draw the plan himself in order to understand the settlement? It is arguable that the only way to understand a locality is to draw it. If this is true, then those who delegate this task can never achieve the detailed depth of understanding that Conzen



**Figure 5.** View from Overton Hill, Cheshire, August 1942 (from MRGC Excursion Notebook IV, p. 102, in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).



Figure 6. Dinkelsbühl (from the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).

was able to reach. In spite of the benefits of IT one has to ask what will be the impact on our understanding of places of the current practice of only using computer-generated plans?

### Conservation practice

Chapter 11 stands alone in a section on 'Morphology and Conservation'. Dating from 1959, it is only four pages long but is important because it sums up in a lucid way an approach to urban conservation that in Britain had to wait 8 years before it became the conventional wisdom of planning practice in the Civic Amenities Act of 1967. It starts by noting the importance of Whitby's townscape to its economic future as a resort and then goes on to urge the preservation of its domestic architecture, including buildings 'that though not of special architectural merit make their contribution by occurring in groups' (p.145). Perhaps preservation is the wrong word since the address (they were the notes for a talk to the local literary and philosophical society)

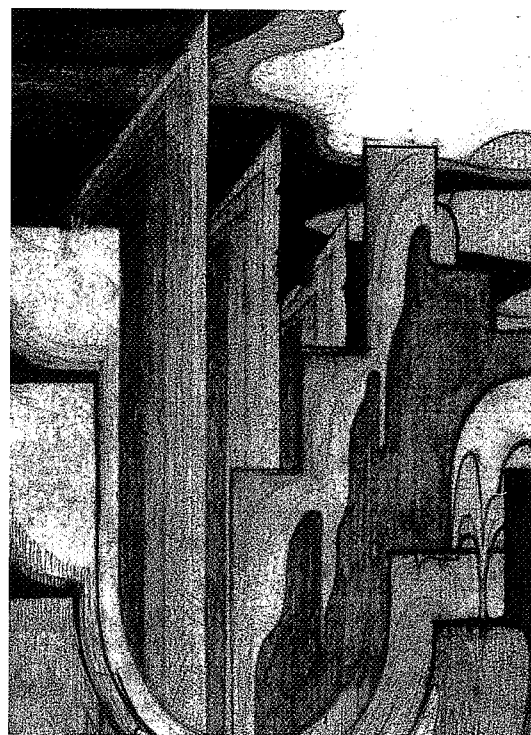


Figure 7. Abstract study (MRGC pencil drawing c. 1942, in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).

then proceeds to emphasize the acceptance of functional change, and of the role of modern architecture within a framework of architectural control for the whole town. He even deplores the lack of design quality on the main approaches – an observation which anticipates the current omnipresent use of gateways in every urban design consultant's report by nearly half a century.

It is in the conservation work which followed the Act of 1967 that the neglect of Conzen's work is most inexplicable. One would have expected that the careful analysis of town plan, plot series and building form would be an obvious basis for both the definition and the management of historic townscapes – as they have been in other contexts. Yet the individual studies prepared under this Act, including the model studies for the historic cities of Chester, York, Chichester and Bath, are firmly based on an approach to urban form which followed the principles set out by Gordon Cullen (1961) in his book *Townscape*. There is a copy in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection which has a carefully

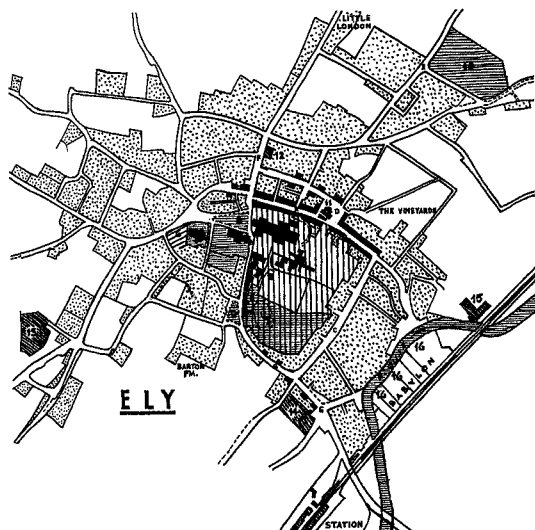


Figure 8. Ely, England, September 1942 (MRGC Excursion Notebook IV, p. 174, in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).

compiled list of the definitions used. The reasons for the success of this version of townscape and the neglect of the Conzenian version must include the absence of any interchange between disciplines but also it could be an issue of Conzen's style of communication.

### Communication

The notes for lectures, such as the Chapter on Whitby or Chapter 12 on the historical townscape of Nelson, New Zealand, are the most easily accessible part of this work. However, many of the other chapters are very dense, containing statements so carefully qualified by sub-clauses as to make the work often difficult to follow. Conzen's search for the absolutely precise definition is carefully recorded in Appendix A, 'A glossary of Conzenian technical terms in urban morphology'. The discussion is sometimes difficult to penetrate because it is so carefully bounded in order to avoid any sort of ambiguity of meaning.

While admirable from a point of view of scientific rigour, this tendency does not help diffuse his ideas, which are startlingly clear in their essence – for example 'the principle of

systematically differentiated persistence of forms' (Conzen, 2004 p. 259), which deals with the different cycles of change of the elements of the townscape. This is just one of the many concepts which need to be rendered more accessible because they are of fundamental utility to both designers and the planners who are put in judgment on their proposals.

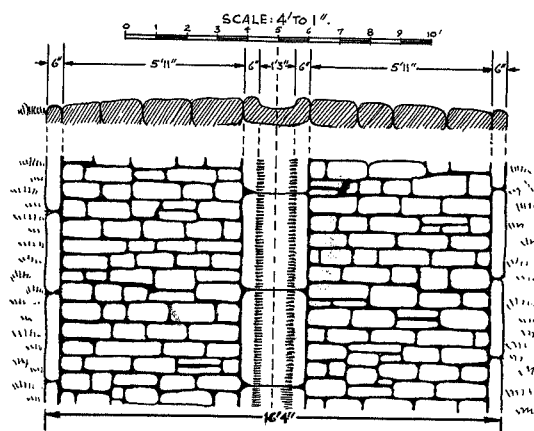
The work of Gordon Cullen, the propagator of that other Townscape, is in direct contrast to that of Conzen. Mainly conveyed through graphics, his message is an evocative and highly subjective communication of a similar passion for towns but which, in comparison with Conzen's work, is so lacking in depth – literally so since it infrequently penetrates beyond the street façade.

The texts published by the Italian architect urban morphologists are similarly difficult to penetrate, so it may be an occupational hazard of morphologists that they are condemned to speak an almost private language. This may be a reason for the relatively narrow dissemination of their work. Perhaps as a complement to Conzen's plea for a sounder philosophical basis for urban morphology (reprinted from *Urban Morphology* as Chapter 6 in this volume) – we need a campaign of *vulgarisation* (as the French would say), or more up-to-date, a morphology lite.

### Conclusion

In both the intoxicating sweep of his thought and his concern with detail, Conzen recalls Fernand Braudel, who also can be celebrated for his dazzling ability to move from the longest historical cycle to the most apparently mundane aspect of everyday life. In this book Conzen moves from a discussion of the medieval urbanization regions of what he terms (with a characteristic concern for precision) Peninsular Europe to one of the small window panes of the German settlers' houses in Nelson or the construction of a Roman road (Figure 9).

It is arguable that the generation of refugees from Nazi Germany changed the world of the arts and sciences in Britain and the United



**Figure 9. Roman road, Blackstone Edge, Pennines, England, June 1942 (from MRGC Excursion Notebook IV, p. 174, in the M.R.G. Conzen Collection).**

States. In his way Conzen, a member of this group, changed the world of the study of urban form – at least the anglophone world. Unlike so many of his contemporaries who moved on to the United States, Conzen chose to stay in Britain, to the great gain of that country. *Thinking about urban form* is a fitting tribute to him and its skilful assembly offers an opportunity that has not previously existed – to become familiar in one volume with the remarkable breadth and depth of Conzen's work.

### Acknowledgement

Figures 2 and 4-9 are reproduced with the permission of Peter Lang.

## Urban Land

The contents of *Urban Land* (64, 6: 2005) include the following contributions on 'green' issues and urban development:

- Mitra, A., 'Revisiting development models'.
- Cunningham, S., 'Restorative development'.
- Valentine, B., 'Making smaller better'.
- Kurz, C.W., 'A green tale'.
- Keyes, B., 'Brownfield transactions'.
- Tarnay, S. and McMahon, E., 'Toward green urbanism'.

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Gensler, D. and Brill, E., 'Green moves mainstream'.

Rose, J.F.P., 'The business case for green building'.

Browning, W.D., Cramer, J.S. and Frej, A.B., 'Going green'.

Scholz-Barth, K., 'Harvesting \$ from green roofs'.

Sparks, C.J., 'Treating waste'.

Kirk, P.L., 'Managing the unexpected'.

Schmitz, A. and Scully, J., 'Slimming down'.