

VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Unloved places revisited: archaeology and urban planning

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In his recent opinion piece on ‘unloved places’ Julian Lamb (2008) noted archaeology’s capacity to reveal urban time-depth, but he also identified the discipline’s tacit assumption of a separation between ‘now’ and ‘then’ as the inherent weakness in the archaeological engagement with *contemporary* cityscapes and in the archaeological contribution to the planning issues germane to those cityscapes. His comments recalled in my mind an assertion made more than 25 years ago by Peter Clack and Susanne Haselgrove that ‘archaeologists still have no clear idea of what they are trying to contribute to urban studies’ (Clack and Haselgrove, 1981, p. 3). Clack and Haselgrove were writing about medieval and earlier urbanisms in particular, and from within an English research environment, but their assertion had a larger geographical and chronological catchment at the time, and was an acknowledgement of archaeology’s limited participation back then in the wider, cross-disciplinary, field of urban studies.

Most theoretically-aware archaeologists today would reject Lamb’s comments as somewhat inaccurate with respect to the discipline in general, pointing out how postmodern reflection within archaeology has revealed the embeddedness of the construct of ‘then’ in the construct of ‘now’. And, although not widely recognized (see Merrifield, 2002, for example), so-called historical archaeology (which describes the archaeological study of the modern period) has been pushing archaeological praxis away from functionalist interpretations of recovered data in the direction of a usually-Marxian social activism for the contemporary world, often in

urban environments (Leone, 2005; Schavelzon, 1999). Much of the impetus for this ‘emancipatory archaeology’, as Dean Siatta (2007) has called it (albeit in a non-urban context), has come from university-sector archaeology, and it clearly fulfills some of the facilitating, partnership and technical roles that Gilderbloom and Mullins (2005) argue that the academy should contribute to the issue of urban sustainability. The explicitly political agenda of some of the work in historical archaeology in North America in particular fits well with the view that ‘each generation... defines the urban question after its own fashion, as an articulation of social challenges, political predicaments and theoretical issues reflecting the current conjuncture of urban society’ and addresses that new definition through ‘new conceptual tools and new forms of political mobilization’ (Scott and Moulaert, 1997, p. 267).

Yet Lamb is largely correct. Urban morphologies of the recent historical past are often fully documented through non-archaeological source materials (cartographic, documentary, photographic, even news media), so the need that archaeologists *themselves* see for the unravelling of the spatial and morphological histories of urban spaces is considerably less for the modern and contemporary phases of towns and cities than for medieval and earlier phases. If such unravelling is considered less necessary – I would not say it is *unnecessary* – does archaeology have much else to offer? The answer is yes, at a micro-scale. Within the broad shapes of urban environments, people, individually and collectively, create local, archaeologically-legible, habitational spaces; they

sometimes do this by moulding their signifying cultural practices into urban morphologies and topographies inherited from pasts with which they have no ancestral connection; other times they do this by simply resisting those inheritances and the ideologies which originally informed their creation. Herein lies archaeology's greatest potential contribution to the comprehension of the contemporary urban condition. But in many jurisdictions – I would not dare to be more specific – urban archaeologists have indeed, as Lamb puts it, 'overlooked [the] opportunity to investigate and record those inhabited urban places that still exist within our contemporary built environments'.

In Ireland, for example, the emphasis within the archaeological profession and the heritage agencies has been on the efficient retrieval of data from the more distant past, followed by its *normative* explanation (O'Keeffe, 2009). These attainable and quantifiable goals allow archaeologists in Ireland to contribute historical detail to the discussion of 'the urban', which they have done very successfully over the past 3 decades, but have neither encouraged them nor equipped them to intercede in wider debates on urban issues, except with respect to the physical preservation of what is canonically defined as heritage. It is worth noting in this regard that the Heritage Council of Ireland (n. d.) commissioned the Oxford Archaeological Unit less than a decade ago to review urban archaeological practice in Ireland, and that its comprehensive report, available on-line at <http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/publications/urbanarch/execsummary.html>, does *not* recommend any of the shifts in the epistemology, methodology or chronological reach of archaeological practice that might address Lamb's point; there is, in other words, nothing radical in the report's conclusions that there is a need for 'a practical definition of sustainability for the historic environment in the local context of urban archaeology, architecture and townscape', and a need for 'future urban archaeology research frameworks ... to establish some basic tenets about the survival and future potential of archaeological deposits, and some basic questions about urbanism in general as well as about individual towns'.

But I think there is reason for optimism. We must accept that archaeological interventions in urban spaces, at least in the western hemisphere, are usually developer-funded and of a rescue nature, so to explore the archaeology of urban contemporaneity is a luxury towards which no money is ever given. And we should probably accept that this has allowed archaeologists and

heritage agencies to quietly wriggle free of responsibility for recording and interpreting, and for providing planning guidance with respect to, the materialities of contemporary cities and contemporary city communities. But we are beginning to see a change. For example, English Heritage's project on *Change and creation: historic landscape character 1950-2000* (Bradley *et al.*, 2004) (<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~arch0217/changeandcreation/>) is an imaginative archaeological engagement, by a national heritage agency often accused anecdotally of conservatism, with the sort of lived-in space that Lamb identifies as deserving of it. Even in Ireland, where radical archaeological thinking is not widespread, there are signs of change. One of the criticisms that I would level at *Urban archaeological practice in Ireland* is that it leaves working class and certain other contemporary communities in Dublin (such as the immigrant African community) doubly disenfranchised: their heritages are not old enough to be subjected to the same level of archaeological engagement (and legal protection) as earlier heritages, and the capacity of individual archaeologists to train their intellects on issues of concern to those communities is blunted by the requirements of disciplinary professionalism and by a narrow institutional vision of what constitutes 'proper' archaeology. And yet, the very same Heritage Council also generously funded *Placing voices, voicing places: spatiality, materiality and identity-formation among Dublin's working class and immigrant communities*, a project by myself and a number of colleagues on the heritages of three communities in Dublin city – the African immigrant community, the Muslim community, and the city's 'traditional' or 'indigenous' working class – of which the stated objective was to challenge fundamentally Ireland's official heritage discourse, as articulated by the Heritage Council itself. This willingness of a statutory heritage agency to fund a project that openly aims to subvert its own understanding of urban heritage is laudable indeed. The results of *Placing voices, voicing places* will be published in time, and a summary will be submitted to *Urban Morphology*, but suffice it to say here that the project's cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral membership, and its insistence on listening to local community voices articulate their sense of their own materiality, suggests how a conceptual road-map for an archaeology of Lamb's 'unloved places' and of other contemporary urban places will eventually be developed.

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On designing, inhabitation, and morphology

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The buildings and spaces that we create and maintain are inseparable from human life. We cannot live without some form of shelter and no built form will endure without inhabitation. Looking at built form is looking at a living whole and human action is its animating force. At a small scale it could be someone arranging things on a table or hanging a picture on a wall. At a large scale it could be the construction of regional infrastructure. There is no clear distinction between shaping and inhabiting built form.

As professional designers we place ourselves between form and inhabitant, claiming mediation. This position, as first adopted in the Renaissance, has caused us to see the built environment as a design product first of all. In need of a tool for our mediation we invented the concept of function. Although we all agree that form no longer follows function, we still look for a programme before we design. But Summerson (1960) already noted that there is no way a form can be extracted from a programme. There is always that 'leap of faith', as he terms it, that the designer must make to arrive at a form.

This intrusion of the self-image of the mediator does not work for observation of the built environment either. If we truly want to understand the marriage of inhabitation and physical form, we

must step out of the picture, and try to see it as an autonomous phenomenon. Too complex to be considered a human artifact, which we can shape at will, the unity of human life and physical presence has its own laws, or habits, or peculiar properties, which we must accept and respect.

To obtain the distance needed for respectful acceptance, we must set aside our preferences on how we personally would like the built environment to be. This is a difficult thing to do. For professional architects and planners the question as to what is a 'good' built environment is central. We instinctively judge whatever built form we see. After all, we are paid for deciding what is good and what is not, and we have been taught how to make such decisions. Necessary as it is to guide action, the question as to what is a 'good' environment cannot help us learn about environment as such. It only can be posed and addressed after we have learned what we are actually dealing with.

Looking at the built environment as an autonomous entity demands that we find all forms of settlement of interest: the contemporary mega city as well as the humble village; Venice and historic Amsterdam as well as Beijing in the Ming dynasty; and the American suburbs as much as informal settlements like those around Mexico city

and between Cairo and the pyramids. All merit our attention. As observers we should emulate the biologist who studies all plants with equal zeal. If he is biased, it is only because he wants them all to be healthy. As designers, however, we have been trained to be florists who decide what is beautiful and appropriate and arrange the bouquet accordingly.

Although intervention and judgment must be postponed for the sake of observation, what we learn from the built environment can guide our action and make our designing a contribution to its cultivation. It is somewhat like the way in which knowledge of plants and trees guides the cultivation of a garden, or the way knowledge of the human body enables the medical doctor to intervene successfully.

The truly operative force that unites form and inhabitation is control. As inhabitants, we always control *some* physical elements, if only the furniture in the house we have rented. We also control the space we occupy by the right to decide who and what we shall allow inside.

Control causes change and change reveals control. Considering how certain physical entities – like houses and apartment units – may change and in fact *do* change, we can determine the reach of controlling parties and hence the boundaries of their realms. Considering how parties configure the forms they control, helps us find shared preferences and common values. Finally, finding a point where some things and people enter a space while others do not, we find territorial boundaries.

In this way we find out what is constant by observing how things change. This is nothing new: it is the way in which we have always come to know the natural world.

Among such constants we find, for instance, that the physical environment is hierarchically structured. The network of urban spaces is slower to change than the buildings in it, and a configuration of furniture changes faster than the building that contains it. This, in turn, shapes such professions as urban design, architecture, and interior design; each operating on a different level of the physical hierarchy. We also find that control of spaces maintains a territorial structure that is also hierarchical: this time by inclusion; one territory containing another. The two hierarchies are not necessarily congruent, but we can find out how they influence one another. In addition we learn how those who can act on form embrace common styles, types, patterns, and systems by means of which their individual identity fits into a collective coherence, demonstrating that our exercise of

control is socially endowed (Habraken, 1998).

We can learn more, in this way, by comparison of fabrics. We may see, for instance, a difference in degrees of control distribution. Where control is dispersed and exercised by many – each at some place and to some extent – environment is fine-grained and hence flexible, and varied. Where control is centralized and exercised by few, change is limited to larger infrequent operations and uniformity appears. These differences invite further study about the relation between control patterns and sustainability.

Comparison also shows how physical hierarchies may be composed differently in different cultures and how this composition may shift over time. Environments may gain a level: for instance, the introduction of a distinct furniture level in contemporary Japanese environment, and of a ‘fit-out’ level in office buildings, retail centres and other forms of building today. Or they may lose a level: for instance, the disappearance of public space as a framework for building in Modernist urbanism.

Moreover, the study of territorial hierarchies teaches us that terms like ‘public’ and ‘private’ space are relative. When entered from a private room, the living space in the house is ‘public’ space (a boundary is crossed upward in the hierarchy) but the same living space is ‘private’ space when entered from the street (a downward crossing). Yet territorial depth can be defined by counting crossings of control boundaries, and urban fabrics can be compared in terms of the territorial depth they offer. A deep territorial structure means a fine-grained distribution of control, which invites a closer investigation of the relation between territorial depth and sustainability.

Observation and comparison may produce new concepts. We have already found that the concept of ‘function’ does not help because it does not state a property of form, but an intention to instruct design. While form cannot follow function, it can allow use, and we can assess the ‘capacity’ of a form to accommodate use. A couple looking for a house to rent or to buy may enter a room and discuss what could be done in it. They may find it suitable for a guest room, a workspace, or a child’s territory, for example. Assessing *capacity* entails consideration of the possible relations between two levels of the physical hierarchy: for instance, a space made on the level of the building, relative to possible arrangements on the level of its furniture. Methods have been developed to compare capacity formally, relating different levels in the physical hierarchy.

To include control in our observation of form inevitably introduces a socio-political implication. That kind of implication also goes for the study of economics, which is about control as well and is not without reason called the 'dismal science'. The link is familiar to practitioners, of course, and perhaps wisely circumvented by them, but must be accepted by researchers of built environments. Yet strictly speaking we do not need to know *who* is in control. We are primarily interested in patterns of control.

More disturbing perhaps is that we learn that an autonomous environment does not sit easily with architectural ideology. The stability implied by deeper control hierarchies of form and space contradicts the belief that good art demands full top-down control. Territorial reality, which in history is a source of architectural elaboration of gates and other forms of transition, is now denied contemporary expression, because we prefer to maintain the illusion of free flowing spaces without

boundaries of any kind. Finally, sharing of form among designers, by way of type, pattern or system, was always the source of coherence in the built environment, but now is believed to be detrimental to self-expression and originality.

Note

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The historico-geographical approach to urban form

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Karl Kropf's article in this issue (pp. 105-20) presents an in-depth analysis of different methodological approaches in studies of urban form. His aim is to identify possible common tools of analysis. The part of the article that interested me most was his analysis of studies by British geographers, in particular those by M. R. G. Conzen. Though the work in this field by geographers is not a topic on which I have special knowledge, I took an interest in the Italian translation of Conzen's monograph on the town of Alnwick¹ a few years ago and I was determined at that time to learn more about this important scholar. I was, incidentally, fortunate enough to meet Conzen in Birmingham in 1997. I propose to focus my observations here on the relationship between studies of urban form carried out by English geographers and those carried out by both architects from the Italian typo-morphological school and Italian geographers.

In the second chapter of his monograph, Conzen examines closely the methodological principles of urban and territorial analysis. Many statements he makes are in perfect accord with the methods and

concepts of the Caniggian school. I should like to begin by commenting on some excerpts from Conzen's text which reveal that he came to the same conclusions, and at the same time, as those of the typological-process-based school in Italy.

'Towns have a life history. Their development, together with the cultural history of the region in which they lie, is written deeply into the outline and fabric of their built-up areas' (p. 6). This affirmation, that the history of the city is written into the fabric and outline of towns as we see them today, constitutes the basis for conducting morphological 'readings' at the scale of buildings for the simple reason that only in this manner can we understand what preceded what we see today. 'Even where plots have been altered...the plot pattern as a whole is full of residual features from earlier periods and may in fact appear unaltered in all its essential characteristics' (p. 7). This standpoint is well founded, for the permanence of ownership divisions is a fundamental element in urban analysis: these are the most difficult outlines to transform and from them, therefore, we can individualize, through a process moving backwards

in time, the original structure of a particular aggregate. Hence 'an evolutionary approach, tracing existing forms back to the underlying formative processes and interpreting them accordingly, would seem to provide the rational method of analysis' (p. 7).

The definition of urban form analysis – as a study of the evolution of the urban fabric – coincides with the concept of the typological process which is one of the fundamental elements of typo-morphological studies. Various other related statements by Conzen are consonant with the typological approach. 'Each period leaves its distinctive material residues in the landscape and for the purpose of geographical analysis can be viewed as a *morphological period* (p. 7). 'The formative processes underlying areal phenomena must be demonstrated if concepts of general significance are to be produced'. 'The present townscape is the accumulated record of distinct morphological periods' (p. 9). 'It seems rational, therefore, to proceed broadly by cross-sections in time' (p. 9). The individualization of distinct morphological periods, in which, through in-depth analysis, one can reconstruct the many features pertaining to the course of evolution in any given geographical area is fundamental. It allows us to compare the structure of different areas by looking at the time phases through which the present fabric has formed and moreover contrast eras and features even in places distant from each other.

That comparisons of the analyses of English geographers with those of Italian typo-morphological scholars, largely architects, exemplify major commonalities is becoming increasingly appreciated. However, it is useful to add to these comparisons some thoughts on the Italian school of geography, which has an age-old tradition of study and research promoted by Florence's own Accademia dei Georgofili, founded in 1753.² Here we find commonalities with *both* the Conzenian school *and* the Caniggian school.

In a time closer to our own, the Florentine school of geographers was led by Prof. R. Biasutti³ who in 1924 began studying rural buildings. He went on to publish numerous essays and articles on the topic. Having set up a research series on the ethnological geography of rural dwellings in Italy (*Dimore rurali in Italia*), in 1938 he published his first volume on rural dwellings in Tuscany, entitled *Casa rurale in Toscana*.⁴ The series developed over the following decade and about 30 volumes were published on the different regions and sub-regions of Italy.⁵ Individual research papers were published based on the common method of analysis

established by Biasutti. Each study began with a description of site topography, geology and flora and fauna and went on to consider human intervention, including a synthetic analysis of different agricultural uses. There was then a detailed examination of a sample of rural buildings. The buildings were studied by means of a comparison of 'models', but they are in fact precursors of the investigation of 'types' as practised today by architects of the Caniggian school.

In accord with this positivist framework, Biasutti constructed models of the different characteristics of rural buildings. These are enriched by the particular attention given to the constants and variants found in their construction, and by in-depth study of their temporal stratification by means of diachronic analysis of artefacts. Thus we get close to the concept of 'type' as a construct present in the minds of men – in a certain area and at a particular historical moment – before the building is brought into existence. The 'type' is the concise concept of all components necessary to make the building and it is the product of the cultural legacy from those preceding us and providing an expression of the contemporary civil society. The classifications and comparisons in these publications constitute already typo-morphological analyses which can be compared with 'readings' of existing buildings with a view to optimizing contemporary projects that we, as practising architects, are asked to produce.

There is little doubt that the research carried out by the Florentine school of geographers emerges from a milieu shared by British geographers. It also seems that the Italian school was not, as had been thought previously, tied to a provincialism typical of much Italian cultural expression, which is often an attempt to keep up with more up-to-date developments imported from other countries. Instead, in the case of both geographers and architects, they were part of international developments. This is demonstrated by a debate in 1946,⁶ in a journal edited by the architect G. Michelucci, on a proposal by M. R. G. Conzen in the *Town Planning Review*⁷ on the constitution and definition of the then new science of town planning. In this debate the views of Italian workers in the field are presented and also a paper by the famous linguist B. Migliorini on the appropriateness of the neologism '*geoprosopy*' proposed by Conzen.

Notes

1. Conzen, M. R. G. (1969) *Alnwick, Northumberland*:

- a study in town-plan analysis* Institute of British Geographers Publication 27 (Institute of British Geographers, London) 2nd edn.
2. The academy was founded by Abbot Ubaldo Montelatici with support from the Grand Duke's Government: today it still brings together scholars and specialists in the field to discuss and resolve pertinent problems and it publishes a prestigious scientific bulletin.
 3. Biasutti (1878-1965) was a student in Florence and then Professor at the University of Naples. From 1927 he was a member of the Academy of the Lincei in Florence.
 4. Biasutti, R. (1938) *Casa rurale in Toscana* (Forni, Bologna).
 5. The direction of the series, published without interruption until 1970, was awarded to two students of Biasutti: Prof. G. Barbieri and Prof. L. Gambi, distinguished Professors of Geography at the Universities of Florence and Bologna.
 6. The debate, instituted by D. Adriello, can be found in the journal *La nuova città*, No. 6/7 (1946) 52-6.
 7. Conzen, M. R. G. (1938) 'Towards a systematic approach in planning science: geoprospect', *Town Planning Review* 18, 1-26.

Housing associations and built-form conservation in the Netherlands: another gap to bridge

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A number of contributions to this journal have drawn attention to the need to bridge the gap between urban morphological research and practice and to the ways of meeting this need. The weak link between organizations responsible for built heritage conservation and urban morphologists engaged in research with a direct bearing on conservation is especially unsatisfactory. As an urban morphology researcher who has recently moved into practice in the Netherlands, I am struck by another lacuna in this field: namely, the minimal representation of *woningcorporaties* in the Dutch conservation debate. These 'corporations' are probably best understood in the English language as 'housing associations' – the term used in these comments.

A large percentage of listed buildings in the Netherlands are owned by these associations. Though exact numbers are not available, it is thought that they own several thousand of the listed buildings designated by central, provincial and local governments. The number is likely to rise further now that the Dutch government, like a number of other governments, has turned its attention to buildings and monuments of the period since the Second World War, many of which are owned by housing associations.

A number of housing associations are already playing an active part in the restoration of buildings and are beginning to consider more seriously their role in the field of heritage and conservation and their social responsibility towards it. Nevertheless,

the majority of them still have to formulate their policy on how to deal with these often vulnerable objects.

An example of a housing association that values its listed buildings highly is Van Alckmaer voor wonen, a small association in Alkmaar that owns about 3000 dwellings. Approximately 40 of these are either listed buildings or 'characteristic buildings' (*beeldbepalende panden*), considered by the local government to have particular value, often because they are situated within a conservation area. This association has gained considerable experience restoring and adapting listed buildings for new uses. One of its main objectives as described in its charter is to 'contribute actively to obtaining and preserving buildings of historical, art historical and/or local value'. Local built heritage is acquired, restored and, in most cases, made habitable. Prospective occupants of a listed building are only granted leases if they show genuine enthusiasm for living in a restored historical building.

This is but one example of a Dutch housing association putting effort into the restoration of the built heritage. A network of housing associations owning listed buildings has recently been established. This group aims to increase expertise amongst associations through exchanging information, knowledge and experience.

Housing associations are important actors and stakeholders in conservation of the built heritage in the Netherlands. They have developed expertise in

dealing with listed buildings through years of experience. Sometimes, as in Alkmaar, restoration is one of the main activities of the organization. Thus the links between housing and conservation need to be considered more closely in both research

and practice. There is undoubtedly a case for greater participation by housing associations in the Dutch conservation debate. Moreover, the issues involved have wider, international relevance, and include urban morphological aspects.

Zen and the art of urban change: *Wabi-Sabi* – a new perspective for urban morphology

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A quarter of a century has passed since Robert Pirsig (1974) introduced the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism to our Western understanding of quality. Despite little initial enthusiasm – his work is credited as having the greatest number of publisher rejections in literary history – his motorcycle musings are now considered seminal across an eclectic range of disciplines from modelling risk in large construction projects to electronic software design.

The central thrust of Pirsig's work is a critique of rationality: that is not to suggest that we should act irrationally, but that a certain 'fuzziness' in our thought and analysis can be highly enlightening. The argument is beautifully simple, it is proposed that Western thought is influenced by a historical discourse of rationality and bivalence: where something is either one thing or another; right or wrong; male or female for example. Much of Western science and analytical thinking are founded on this construct. Eastern thought, however, is intuitive and multivalent: where something can be one thing, or another, and indeed both at the same time (Kosco, 1994). This approach can serve to remind urban morphologists to be comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction.

Wabi-Sabi

Now that fuzzy thinking is more widely accepted in academic research and analysis, the environment is much more welcoming to the potential of other ideas that have an Eastern origin. With this in mind, there is an idea that could be of great value for those with an interest in our changing contemporary urban places: this is *Wabi-Sabi*.

Little has been published about *Wabi-Sabi*, and it is interesting to note that Koren (1994) argues

that it has a history of obfuscation: *Wabi-Sabi* is to be felt and experienced rather than rationalized and written about. Notwithstanding this, it can be seen that at the heart of *Wabi-Sabi* is an appreciation of things that are imperfect, impermanent and incomplete; it is a celebration of change and the inevitable decay of all things. As an artistic aesthetic, Western pioneers of *Wabi-Sabi* can be found in sculpture, textiles and design where, as an antithesis to 'modernism', artefacts are valued for their patina of age and decay and not their slick sensory reduction to simple universal lines (Brown, 2007; Juniper, 2003; Koren, 1994; Powell, 2005). But *Wabi-Sabi* is much more than just an artistic aesthetic. As an essential philosophy it can provide a new insight into the way we understand our everyday life, and indeed it can guide how we plan for the inevitability of change. For urban morphology, which is arguably orientated towards the study of change, *Wabi-Sabi* offers a new opportunity with two main points of cross-fertilization.

A critical reflection on historiography

The first point of cross-fertilisation relates to a fundamental re-evaluation of the historiography implicit in much research into past urban change. It can be argued that when we study the past, we are engaged in a form of production: we take texts and artefacts that have survived from past periods and, through a process of interpretation, we create an account of that past period – an account that exists in the present not the past. In urban morphology's sister discipline, archaeology, Shanks (2008) argues that the methodologies we use to construct an account of the past can be so strong that they overwhelm and over-structure the evidence, such that researchers simply find what

they were looking for in the first place. Shanks suggests that *Wabi-Sabi*, as a conceptual framework for archaeological theory, can maintain an account of the past that is comfortable with contradiction and ambiguity and does not seek to be definitive. 'The irony is that such a design philosophy is far from remote and abstract, but profoundly grounded and holistic' (Shanks, 2008, p. 2). As a theoretical framework for interpreting the past, *Wabi-Sabi* has much to offer urban morphology. For example, a *Wabi-Sabi* outlook can act as a counter-balance to those attempts to provide a definitive account of a past period by inviting on-going re-interpretation and encouraging the emancipation of other histories that may not share equal status or authority at that time. This does not lead to the slippery slope of relativism, but creates a path to a more grounded approach that responds to de Certeau's (1984) concern that definitive accounts are the enemy of the past.

Living with a post-war reconstruction environment

The second point of cross-fertilisation relates to the attitudes people have about our contemporary urban places and reflects on preservation concerns as well as morphological analysis. Bearing in mind the fuzziness of the approach, *Wabi-Sabi* can support both preservation of our 'gritty' post-war environments and widespread removal of these places from the landscape: it should not be forgotten that *Wabi-Sabi* is an approach that seeks to hold contradiction.

On the one hand, *Wabi-Sabi* promotes an appreciation of change, decay and imperfection. Whilst this might seem appropriate for an ancient castle with its medieval and Victorian accretions, when applied to sites of post-war reconstruction, many would consider it rather perverse and would find it impossible to cherish such places. However, perhaps it is the mindset of aesthetic beauty that needs our attention rather than the physical place itself. *Wabi-Sabi* offers an alternative aesthetic that can help us appreciate the beauty of post-war concrete, complete with its cracking façades and graffiti, rather than simply sweeping it away in the drive towards regeneration. As an illustration, in the city of Birmingham, UK, the Eastside region has recently been the subject of much interest by developers who, it seems, are intent on removing the character of the place. It was, and still is to some extent, a place where modern light engineering firms, street corner cafés, short rows of late-Victorian terraced housing and a 1960s

snooker hall sit like four children squashed onto the back seat of a small family car: crowded and noisy but tolerant through familiarity. There are clear links and parallels to the 'anti-gentrification' work of Jane Jacobs (1961) for example; but *Wabi-Sabi* could offer a new town-planning aesthetic for Eastside that challenges the quest for seamless geometric organization in our daily lives and supports an organic, imperfect, even gritty growth of a place and a more genuinely sustainable solution to urban living.

On the other hand, in apparent contradiction to our Western perspective, *Wabi-Sabi* can help find the balance of material 'things': the things we keep and, importantly, the things we let go through focusing on materialism and choice. Koren (1994) argues that, even at the most austere level, we live in a material world of things, and choice is at the heart of the matter: '*Wabi-Sabi* is exactly about the delicate balance between the pleasure we get from things and the pleasure we get from the freedom of things' (Koren, 1994, p. 59). With increasing evidence of the listing and preservation of post-war structures it appears that they are being collected like antiques, even if these places sit uncomfortably with the serious challenges of post-peak oil living and climatic change. *Wabi-Sabi* provides an intellectual framework that can mitigate anxiety about change in our urban places and appreciates the decaying nature of all things through valuing the importance of letting some things go – including those places we might describe as 'heritage'.

Wabi-Sabi: an Eastern mindset

This viewpoint is intended to be a simple signpost rather than anything like a comprehensive treatise on *Wabi-Sabi*. The sign is intended to urge urban morphologists to be not only comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction but indeed to see the opportunity that lies in this as a thoroughly grounded approach to historiography and regeneration.

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Informal settlements: a neglected aspect of morphological analysis

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Informal developments are a much publicized aspect of cities, especially in Latin America. However, little has been done to understand the characteristics of their urban forms or consider their design implications. In Bogotá, Colombia early work was done by Molina, Salazar and Salguero (1983) and Jiménez (1994), and more recently studies have been undertaken by Carvajalino and Avendaño (2000) and Tarchópoulos and Ceballos (2005). During October and November 2008, an 'urban design charrette' was organized jointly by the National University of Colombia at Bogotá and the Central University of Venezuela at Caracas. Studies were made in the field at Barrio Mamera in Caracas and Barrios Aures and Hunza in Bogotá. This 'viewpoint' summarizes the morphological outcomes of this work.

Caracas and Bogotá

Mamera is located in Antimano, on the western fringes of Caracas, whereas Hunza and Aures in Bogotá are located on the north-western side of the city within the boundaries of Localidad Suba, in a relatively flat area bordered by the marshland of Humedal Juan Amarillo and the Hills of Suba. Poverty is interwoven with improvised urban landscapes in both cities, but morphological analysis reveals significant differences between the cities and suggests some of the variety of design challenges that are posed.

Settlements in Bogotá exhibit more self-sufficiency and variety in their land-use patterns. Mamera has very few ancillary activities surrounding its housing areas. To some extent the 'barrio' in Bogotá is an integrated, self-sufficient community, whereas Mamera depends to a substantial degree on the city's services.

Hunza and Aures exhibit clear urban tissues, well defined public and private spaces, and a strong connection in form and structure to institutional social housing models. The most popular settlements consist of 12 x 42 m sets of street blocks arranged in a Cartesian grid with an empty block (100 x 40 m in average size) in the middle of the settlement for public services and park provision. Individual 6 x 12 m plots are arranged symmetrically in a linear manner along each block. This similarity allows dwellers to have easy access to legal infrastructure services (Cortés and Salazar, 1993).

In Mamera, in contrast, the tissue is configured in a predominantly organic pattern, reflecting a degree of adaptation to the steep slopes on which it is located. Peña (2007, p. 107) finds similarities between informal settlements in Caracas and the layouts of medieval towns. However, plots in this settlement have particularly marked variations in size and shape. Both settlements have poor links to neighbouring settlements and to the main communication systems of the rest of the city.

In Bogotá public space consists not only of areas for roads, parks and social services. It also includes various 'ecological' structures as well (forests, streams etc), whereas in Caracas public space appears to include areas free of buildings for only social, recreational and infrastructure purposes and it has an ill-defined and strongly fragmented pattern (Peña, 2007, p. 107). Both cities lack sufficient public space. Furthermore, in many cases the areas designed for public use are occupied by informal settlements, even areas at risk of landslides and floods.

Despite the uniform plots, houses have very varied architectural patterns in Aures and Hunza. In Mamera the enormous variety of plot shapes encourages even greater architectural variety. In

both cities, there is a predominance of units with 2 or 3 floors and little or no interior free space.

As described by Jiménez (1994), in Aures and Hunza there can be observed various phases of development both for the settlement and each housing unit. Land is subdivided into street blocks and plots for selling by a private developer. Thereafter a process of occupancy and building occurs. In due course community organizations either plea with local politicians for public transport, infrastructure and service provision or seek these goals through a more institutionalized process called 'legalization' or 'integral upgrading'.

The initial basic dwelling, consisting of a single room and a sanitary unit, becomes enlarged and ephemeral materials are replaced by more durable ones. Generally, the initial dwelling in Bogotá is primarily built with such materials as zinc, cane and cardboard, and there is a gradual process of expansion and replacement by such materials as brick and concrete. Once the building has reached a degree of stability, it expands in height and footprint, a process accompanied by a variety of uses and types of tenancy as new space is created for rent and economic activity. The outcome is a mixed-use unit of three floors. In Mamera the process is similar. However, it was not possible to collect evidence of the way ephemeral materials have been replaced by durable ones in that case.

Design implications

Settlement upgrading is an institutionalized strategy adopted in different ways by both cities, following in part the definitions of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the Inter-American Development Bank (Brakarz, 2002). The programmes on the whole stress policy and managerial issues relating to access to land, housing and social services, but little has been done to develop design ideas to support the upgrading of these areas. However, the morphological analysis helped to identify several recommendations for design purposes:

- Public space plays a key role as an integrative device and as a means of promoting individual positive attitudes to upgrading. However, the generation of space in some areas demands additional effort and design strategies to relocate families and activities.
- Natural features and scenic values must be considered not only as needing protection but

also as the basis for recreational activity and, frequently, as an economic opportunity. It is necessary also to identify the potential and limitations of surrounding areas in order to forecast their future use and need for integration, and prevent the expansion of new informal settlements.

- Road network generation or adaptation and public transport provision are important opportunities to generate activity centres and improve access to work and services.
- Local economic activity, represented in a varied land-use pattern, must be stimulated. This entails minor adaptations of form and the provision of space surrounding dwellings.
- Housing typologies and tenancy types reflect adaptability to many technical and socio-economic factors. Instead of imposing standard new 'models' it is much more appropriate to develop and upgrade existing ones. In this case typological analysis has been shown to be very helpful.

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The planning-typological approach

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At the ISUF conference in Cincinnati in 2001 Gian Luigi Maffei, Paolo Vaccaro and I presented the Lexicon of the Muratorian school (Cataldi *et al.*, 2002). I tried on that occasion to summarize the conceptual connections between the key terms of the school in a 'synoptic chart'. I think it would be useful to present the chart again (Figure 1) along with some explanatory text, as my personal contribution to a comparison of the different approaches to urban morphology.

The purpose of the chart is to represent schematically and synthetically the 'Muratorian' system of thought. To be clear, it is necessary to distinguish between 'Muratorian' and 'of Saverio Muratori' to emphasize the grafting of the former onto the maestro's thought, involving many assistants and pupils over several decades. Some of us, starting from an initial adherence to Muratori's inspirational principles and sharing a vision of the world seen through the 'non-deformable' lens of architecture, have endeavoured to develop the thinking in order to make it clearer, more efficient and up-to-date, above all through our diverse individual experience of 'reading' the built environment at various scales.

I say this in anticipation of the possible objection that the chart is an unwarranted conceptual reduction of a highly complex system down to a sort of generic and fixed 'standard' theory. I maintain, however, that this attempt at synthesis provides a simple key to the system (which can be difficult to understand, particularly without access to the original Italian texts) that could help expand the numbers of potential users. There would then be a better chance of clarifying certain problematic issues and developing the system further.

It must suffice here to give just a quick explanation of the chart and direct those who might wish to examine it closer to the main texts of the Muratorian school (Cataldi *et al.*, 2002).

The synoptic chart is basically split into two closely connected parts: the first summarizes the Muratorian theory of crisis and the second encapsulates the Muratorian 'cross-table' method.

The theory of crisis gets its name from one of the most specific terms in Muratori's philosophical lexicon, which is central to the first of his two

principal texts (Muratori, 1963). He basically asserts that architecture reflects the state of civilization (more directly than any other civil or social factor) and therefore the crisis in architecture reflects a crisis in civilization. Modern architecture is the concrete expression of a deep-rooted civil discomfort, probably the most serious and traumatic in the history of mankind, whose consequences have worldwide repercussions. If we become aware of the crisis, we can only strive to overcome it with its own weapons: the critical self-consciousness of the Enlightenment that triggered the underlying processes. The crisis in itself is not an extraordinary phenomenon but a recurrent element of the cyclical process of human development. Generally speaking, it represents a moment between two cycles, between an old and a new process, with a consequent obscuring of conscious vision. This is stimulating but conducive of confusion.

In summary, the theoretical scheme lays down four sequential dialectic expressions, each consisting of binomials, whose interrelated terms are subject to a continuous process of mutual change and progressive modification. The archetype at the root of the system is the relationship between the subject 'man', in his capacity as a conscious being (naturally, 'subject' as seen from our own relative point of view), and the object 'nature'. It is a very particular relationship both because the latter term includes the former, conditioning and limiting man, and because reciprocal exchange occurs between two apparently very different worlds: the mental and the real. This gives rise to the next expression, which is fundamental to all architects, referring as it does to their principal tool, the *progetto* (a mental projection and act of creation), with its particular nature as an idea or concept that precedes and leads to the new object: modified nature. The *progetto* is particularly important because, in a nutshell, it consists of the 'building type', which of necessity comes to mind as a specific concept of a building in, and conditioned by, a particular historical moment and cultural area. The 'building type', as an *a priori* synthesis (Muratori's definition dates back to 1959), is therefore one side of a dual concept with the 'architectural organism', as an

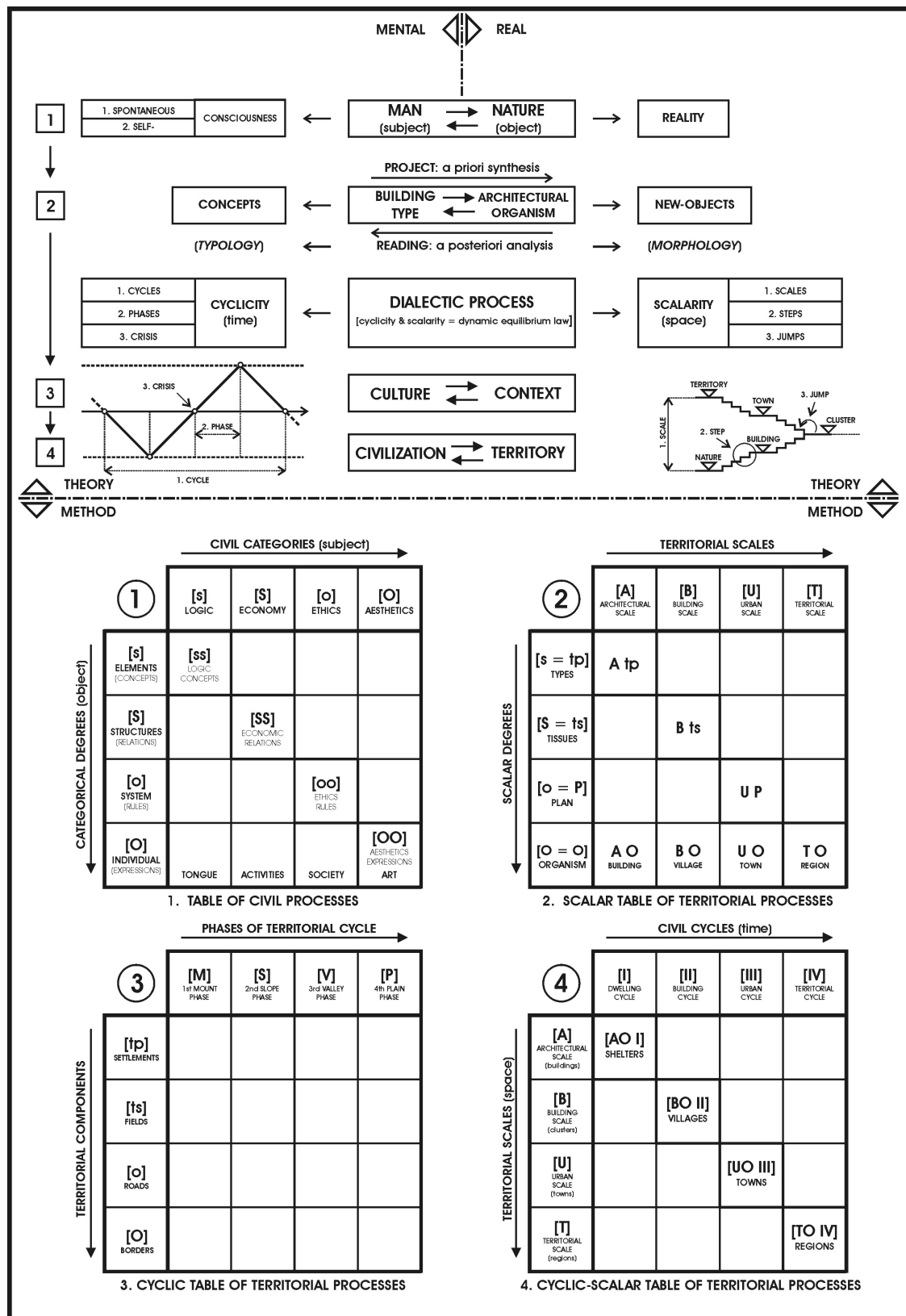


Figure 1. 'Synoptic chart' of key terms.

a posteriori synthesis, that is continually passing from the mental to the real, from project to interpretation (and vice versa), oscillating periodically between maximum universality and maximum individuality. The latter occurs with the subjective application of specific building types in particular times and in different places.

Placing type at the root of the dialectic processes that have led to the progressive transformation of the planet by humankind evidently implies a collective effort and transmission of unself-conscious or spontaneous experience of building, which tends toward simple, economic use of local resources to satisfy the needs of a specific society. With the evolution of culture and the passage in particular from nomadic to settled ways of life, the processes of building become more complex, requiring an increasing degree of critical consciousness. The empirical base of spontaneous consciousness is augmented by more subtle and analytical 'self-consciousness', a term that refers to the capacity of thought to become abstract and 'look in on itself'. It is not by chance that this mode of thinking develops socially in a restricted number of individuals, appearing in the historical moment of the birth of towns and the concomitant appearance of 'writing' and 'architecture'. In other words, there is a passage from a spontaneous dialectic relationship between 'culture' and 'context' to a more sophisticated reflexive relationship between 'civilization' and 'territory' (Muratori, 1967).

Let us now endeavour to understand the law that applies to everything within space and time. At its root, the dynamic nature of the dialectic process between interpretation and project is cyclical and tends to continuously return to its starting point. New objects, once produced, tend to be replicated, and continually reused and transformed, varying in the proportional mixture of continuity and change, quantitative serial multiplications and qualitative organic rearrangements. The transformed object is then the starting point for further new objects. In other words, 'cyclicity' is to time what 'scalarity' is to space: the same transformation law applies with different effects to the two different dimensional values limiting man's life: place as a conservative factor and time as an innovative factor. For the purposes of clarity, 'cyclicity' and 'scalarity' are shown in the chart using separate diagrams, a sinusoid for the former and a flight of steps for the latter. In actual fact, having identified the substantial conceptual symmetry between the constituent parts within each of the two figures ('cycles', 'phases' and 'crises' on the one hand and

'scales', 'steps' and 'scale jumps' on the other), we are led to conclude that the true model should be a dynamic integration in space and time (a sort of winding staircase that spirals progressively outward).

What I have described so far on the theoretical level finds its most coherent expression in the Muratorian method of cross-quadrupartite, cyclico-scalar 'tables' ('*tabelloni*'). Generally speaking, a Muratorian table is a bi-directional, four-sided matrix, which in its simplest version has sixteen internal squares. The two directional axes (the system's origin is conventionally placed in the top left-hand corner) indicate the component cyclical processes of the subject and object, each subdivided into four internal moments. The resulting sixteen squares of possible relations tend to exhaust the range of products generated in the complementary 'mental' spheres of civilization and 'real' spheres of territory. Each 'table' is by nature contemporaneously 'cyclical' (the last square in the bottom right-hand corner can coincide with the first square of a new cycle in the top left corner) and 'scalar' (individual squares in a table can be opened up into sixteen sub-squares with the same overall structure as the main table). The descending diagonal (from the top left to the bottom right) is the median line of maximum yield or efficiency in the process in as much as it relates and reconciles the attitudes of the subject with analogous positional values of the object.

The first two tables must be read in parallel. The most pertinent to our own disciplinary interest is the second, the 'scalar table of territorial processes', which nevertheless needs to be understood in relation to the programmes and reasons driving the formative process, as set out in the similar and complementary table of civil processes. The 'scalar table' places in systematic relation the four scales of the spatial context (architectural, relating to the single building; building, relating to the village; urban, relating to the town; and territorial, relating to the region) and the four internal scalar degrees that in each case proceed from type to organism through the intermediate steps of tissues and plan. The jump in scale is an essential mechanism whereby the last degree for a given scale ('organism' at the bottom of the table) shifts to take the first position ('types', at the top) in the subsequent scale. It is therefore appropriate to define the scales as reciprocally implicated.

The third 'table' is a cyclical continuation of the second, where the various typical scalar organisms assume the more general qualification of 'settlements' as the first constituent components of

each phase of the territorial process, along with the others – ‘tissues’, ‘routes’ and ‘boundaries’. Together they form the overall ‘regional organism’, which is transformed as it passes through the four phases of the process: the hill-top, slope, valley bottom and plain phases. This mechanism of development is based on the assumptions of Muratori’s ‘theory of ridgeways’, which hypothesizes that ancient ridge routes were the original structuring element of the territory (Cataldi, 2005).

The fourth table provides a systematic summary of the previous charts, putting into relative position the civil cycles (time) and territorial scales (space) whose progressive conception and realization (mental before real) by man characterize the major conventional divisions in history. As a final reflection, the current ecumenical cycle raises new global problems and pressing questions for human-

kind. The Muratorian concept of ‘active history’ could provide useful responses to this condition in terms of territorial self-control, sustainable development and urban quality.

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Fourteenth International Planning History Society Conference

The Fourteenth International Planning History Society Conference will be held in Istanbul, Turkey from 12 to 15 July 2010. The theme is ‘Urban Transformation: Controversies, Contrasts and Challenges’.

The conference provides an opportunity not only for a broad investigation of transformation aspects in planning history across the world, but also for sharing academic knowledge and expertise in Istanbul, the European Capital of Culture. In recent years Istanbul has become the focus for a number of transformation initiatives, which have provided challenges to urban governance, cultural and social structure, and historical preservation. Proposals of papers should preferably address one or more of the following aspects of urban transformation, but proposals that cover the full breadth of planning history are also welcome.

- Concepts of urban transformation and planning history
- Urban transformation strategies, policies, tools, management and governance
- Urban transformation and urban space (urban form, architecture, urban heritage sites, landscapes, waterfronts, public spaces etc)

- Urban transformation and land use: housing and squatter settlements, commercial districts, transportation and infrastructure
- Urban transformation and society (social inclusion, social justice, urban gentrification)
- Political economy of urban transformation
- Urban transformation and the environment (sustainable transformations, green interventions, disaster management etc)

The conference is being organized by Istanbul Technical University Faculty of Architecture and Istanbul Technical University Urban and Environmental Planning and Research Centre. The Conference Convener is Professor Dr Nuran Zeren Gülersoy (gulersoy@itu.edu.tr). The Conference Secretary is Assistant Professor Dr Hatice Ayataç (ayatac@itu.edu.tr).

Single paper proposals, roundtables, and other modes of presentation are invited. Abstracts (in English) should not exceed 500 words, and a 200-word biography of the author(s) should also be attached. All proposal abstracts will be refereed by the programme committee. The deadline for the receipt of abstracts is 30 November 2009. Further information is available from www.iphs2010.org
