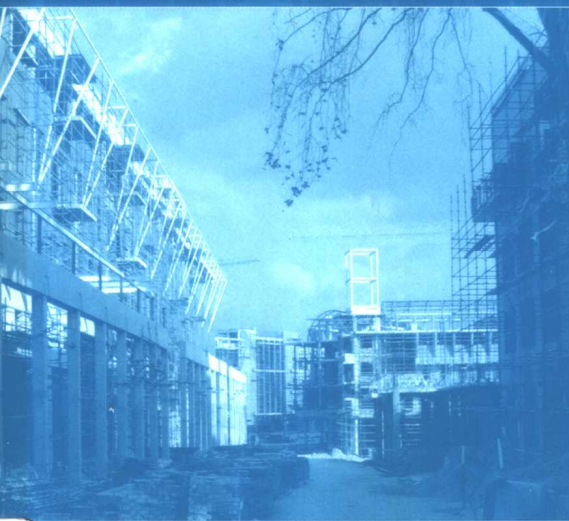


URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

POWER, PEOPLE
AND URBAN DESIGN

IAN BENTLEY



Urban Transformations

Power, people and urban design

Ian Bentley



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Urban Transformations

Cities affect every person's life, yet across the traditional divides of class, age, gender and political affiliation, armies of people are united in their dislike of the transformations that cities have undergone in recent times. The physical form of the urban environment is not a designer add-on to 'real' social issues; it is a central aspect of the social world. Yet in many people's experience, the cumulative impacts of recent urban development have created widely un-loved urban places. To work towards better-loved urban environments, we need to understand how current problems have arisen and identify practical action to address them.

Urban Transformations examines the crucial issues relating to how cities are formed, how people use these urban environments and how cities can be transformed into better places. Exploring the links between the concrete physicality of the built environment and the complex social, economic, political and cultural processes through which the physical urban form is produced and consumed, Ian Bentley proposes a framework of ideas to provoke and develop current debate and new forms of practice.

The book focuses on four key questions, examining the most helpful conceptual framework for thinking about the processes of urban transformation; how this framework can help us to understand how these processes generate, through speculative markets, the forms and patterns of land use which typify recent urban places; the common ground for change that can be identified as the practical basis for widespread action towards better-loved and more sustainable urban places; and how the necessary changes can actually be made to happen in cities world-wide. Ian Bentley concludes by identifying the most promising types of urban forms and working practices through which users and professionals might work together to develop better-loved urban places in the future.

Ian Bentley is professor of Urban Design at the Joint Centre for Urban Design, Oxford Brookes University.

For Iva

Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.

Michel Foucault

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It has taken me a very long time to get this book together, and I have incurred a mass of intellectual and emotional debts along the way. It gives me pleasure to acknowledge these now.

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
PART I	
Problematics of production	5
Introduction	7
1 Untouched by human hand (well, almost)	10
2 Heroes and servants, markets and battlefields	28
3 Genius and tradition	44
Conclusion: a framework of questions	63
PART II	
Spatial transformations and their cultural supports	67
Introduction	69
4 Profit and place	74
5 Propping up the system	95
6 Building bastions of sense	112
Conclusion: supports for the power bloc	132
PART III	
Positive values, negative outcomes	137
Introduction	139
7 Concepts for prospecting common ground	143

viii *Contents*

8 Beyond buzzwords	158
9 Horizons of choice	176
Conclusion: an agenda for positive change	200
PART IV	
Windows of opportunity	203
Introduction	205
10 Reclaiming the Modernist vision	209
11 Experts who deliver	239
12 Artists in a common cause	256
Conclusion: exciting prospects	271
<i>Notes</i>	274
<i>Bibliography</i>	282
<i>Index</i>	292

Figures

1.1	Le Corbusier: the Mill-owners' Building, Chandigarh, 1954	16
1.2	Le Corbusier: Carpenter Visual Arts Center, Harvard University, 1965	17
1.3	The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem	18
1.4	Milan Cathedral	19
1.5	Maillart: Cement Hall, Swiss National Exhibition, Zurich, 1939	20
1.6	Gerrit Rietveld: Schröder House, Utrecht	22
2.1	Richard Rogers: Lloyds Insurance Building, London, 1986	32
2.2	Mixed use development at Gloucester Green, Oxford: Donald Kendrick Associates, 1990	33
2.3	Oxford City Council: Gloucester Green Design Brief	34
3.1	Deep types and surface types	50
3.2	A Machine for Exercising Dogs, by Jonathan Williams	53
3.3	Different plans but the same spatial type: houses by Frank Lloyd Wright	54
4.1	The capital accumulation cycle	74
4.2	The visual impact of increasing plot sizes: Queen Street, Oxford; 1936 (top) and 1983 (bottom)	78
4.3	The 'classical' typology of details	82
4.4	Interior of the Westgate Shopping Mall, Oxford	88
4.5	The blank exterior of the Westgate Mall	89
4.6	Hong Kong from the Peak	93
5.1	Gustav Doré: viaduct in London, 1852	102
5.2	Blank walls to a main distributor road	105
5.3	This is what happens when public space adjoins private outdoor space	106
6.1	The Radburn layout	122
6.2	Enclosure as a principle of urban design: Piazza Erbe, Verona	124
6.3	An enclosed 'townscape' space	125

7.1	A street in Goa, with Hindu (left) and Christian (right) houses	144
8.1	An unsurveilled space which many people found frightening	166
8.2	Different energy requirements for different transport modes	169
8.3	The relationship between density and petrol consumption per person	170
9.1	The relationship between rents and pedestrian flows	181
9.2	The relationship between spatial structure and patterns of activity	181
9.3	The blank backs which result from 'pavilion' development: Birmingham Repertory Theatre	184
9.4	Choices, grids and hierarchies	185
9.5	Choices and the 'grain' of grids	187
9.6	A big block as a barrier to through-movement	188
9.7	Mental maps	192
9.8	Rothenburg ob der Tauber: a complex place with a simple spatial structure	194
9.9	Axial analysis of part of the City of London	195
9.10	Axial analysis of part of the new town of Milton Keynes	196
9.11	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	197
10.1	The positive privacy gradient	214
10.2	The 'perimeter block' type	215
10.3	The native biotic network	216
10.4	Amsterdam's Nieuw Zuid plan	218
10.5	Complex use of the responsive city typology: Hamburg-Horn, 1911, Fritz Schumacher	220
10.6	Apartment building: Neklanova Street, Vyšehrad, Prague	221
10.7	Plan of part of Zeeheldenbuurt	222
10.8	The Zaanhof courtyard with its arched entrances	223
10.9	A memorable townscape relationship	224
10.10	Kiefhoek: air view	225
10.11	Seats at entrances, to encourage elderly residents to join in the life of the public realm	226
10.12	A door at Betondorp	228
10.13	A pedway at Angell Town	230
10.14	The rediscovery of the perimeter block at Newark, N.J.	231
10.15	Vitality and richness in a green street, Dapperbuurt	232
10.16	A. van Wijk School, Oude Westen, Rotterdam, 1982	233
10.17	Housing wrapping a car park: Meinecke Strasse, Berlin; unbuilt project by James Stirling	234
10.18	Integrating dead sheds: Baths Road, Longton, 1996	235
10.19	Perimeter blocks at Venserpolder, Amsterdam: Carel Weber	236

- | | | |
|-------|---|-----|
| 10.20 | A lively perimeter block at Hulme: 'Homes for Change',
Leavey Mills Beaumont, 1994 | 237 |
| 10.21 | Modernist perimeter blocks at Hulme | 238 |

Introduction

The best moments of my life have mostly been in cities. It is in cities, by and large, that I have felt my spine tingle at the sheer beauty of places, and at the variety of experiences they can offer. And it is only in cities that I have experienced those moments of being alone in a friendly crowd that offer the sense of being at once an individual and a member of the human race. As you can tell, I am a romantic so far as cities are concerned. This book is the offspring of an urban love affair.

As someone who loves cities, I find myself alternatively exhilarated, saddened and angered by their recent transformations. On the one hand, for example, I am exhilarated by the increase in multi-cultural richness which I have experienced during my own lifetime. On the other hand, I am saddened and angered by other aspects of urban change, and I am not alone here: Alison Ravetz, for example, surely speaks for many when she says that: 'we are now in a period where most modern development is disparaged and modern architecture frequently described as "a crime against humanity"', while the large city is increasingly associated, as it was in Victorian times, with poverty, violence and danger.¹

In no way, however, should we drift into reading the process of urban transformation as a doom-and-gloom story. Even its most negative aspects have positive, inspirational outcomes, as people from all walks of life fight back to restore the life-enhancing potentials which urban places can have. The amount of time and effort which many people put into improving unloved places, or protecting loved ones from negative change, bears witness to an active resilience which is not the preserve of any particular social group. Those who are most articulate and better-off have more resources to deploy, but the heroic efforts which are also made by under-resourced community groups working to improve modern social housing estates, for example, show that the willingness to fight for better-loved places is not confined to the chattering and scribbling classes.

Inspirational though these efforts are, however, very few people engage in them for fun or in search of moral uplift. I have been professionally involved in a number of them over the years, and I have consistently found that they are mostly carried out by people who would rather be doing something else,

2 *Introduction*

but are forced into action because they feel that there is no alternative if they are to have acceptable urban settings for their lives. All this effort, then, is evidence of some kind of mismatch between the processes through which urban form is produced and transformed, and the desires and aspirations of its users. Speaking with unlikely agreement, across traditional barriers of class, age, political affiliation, ethnicity and gender, city-dwellers are insisting by their actions that something has gone seriously wrong.

This is a situation which cries out for change. It raises serious ethical issues for developers, government agencies and design professionals alike, and it is also a matter of grave economic importance. Too many massive schemes have been demolished because they quickly proved uninhabitable: St Louis's award-winning Pruitt Igoe estate, blown up in 1972, was only the first and most notorious of many on both sides of the Atlantic. Too many others have had to be modified in drastic ways, often at prices far more than their original costs; making it clear that unloved urban places are also awesomely bad investments. From the bleeding-heart liberal to the driest of free-marketeers, we all need to engage in the effort to get better-loved places on the ground.

At the end of the second millennium, this imperative feels ever more urgent. On the one hand, we see the growth of widespread fears about the role which current patterns of urban transformation are playing in an ecological crisis which, some fear, may ultimately threaten the future of human life itself. On the other hand, these dire fears have their positive side, for they foster the development of a powerful 'environmental lobby', with international political support, which offers the prospect of an altogether new scale of opportunity-space for rethinking urban futures.

If we are to take advantage of these new opportunities, we need optimism rather than a paralysing culture of fear. This is no time, however, for the simplistic thinking which often accompanies too facile an optimism. The issues to be thought through here are complex and multi-dimensional. In practice, however, they are all too often addressed in myopic, one-dimensional ways. According to the particular viewpoints of one or other of the myriad specialists in urban affairs, complex issues are reduced to economic problems, or social problems, or architectural problems or whatever. As one particularly blinding aspect of this myopia, urban decisions are typically made with little understanding of the complex interactions between the social and the spatial worlds, ignoring the fact that cities, amongst their other attributes, are the unavoidably spatial settings of our unavoidably social lives, which they affect in far-reaching ways.

Perhaps precisely because it has such an all-pervasive impact on human affairs, the spatial aspect of social experience is all too often just taken for granted in a completely unfocused way. To bring it into focus for a moment, consider your own situation right now. Most of you, no doubt, will be reading these words in a room of some kind. At one level, the design of the room supports the activity of reading, and other activities

besides. As I write these words, it is raining. If there were no roof over my head, the paper would dissolve.

This ability to support human activities is a crucial aspect of any built form. After all, places are usually constructed, at least in part, because they facilitate activities which would be difficult, if not impossible, in a wilderness. At another level, however, the design of any place also puts constraints on the activities which take place in and around it. For example, you will almost certainly have entered your room through a doorway. It is extremely unlikely that you will have smashed your way in through a wall, or tunnelled through the floor; cultural rules, legal sanctions and lack of resources would prevent you, except perhaps in times of war. And if you grow bored with these pages, and wish to glance out at a longer view, you will have to look out through a window, rather than through the solid bits of the walls, floor or ceiling. It is clear that the physical form of the room – the relative positions of its solids and voids – affects what its users can and cannot do: despite its silence, a wall says 'no'; and it says it louder than any 'no' you will ever be able to hear. The spatial structure of the room, and of its relationship to the rest of the built world, has a political dimension.

The politics of space also has an ideological dimension, arising because people invest places with meanings related to rules which they have learned through their own cultural backgrounds. These meanings may impose further constraints on the users concerned, or may offer them further opportunities. For example, imagine two rooms which have identical dimensions and lighting levels, heated to the same comfortable temperature. Imagine that one has windows on to a mountain landscape, walls painted with murals, and an inlaid marble floor. Imagine that the other has walls of unpainted cinder block with a bare concrete floor, and that it only has artificial lighting. One space is to be used as a living room, and the other as a garage. Which, in your culture, would be used for which purpose?

This is, of course, a rhetorical question with an unrealistically obvious answer, chosen to make a point. Real-life examples are often more ambiguous, because different users may invest given places with different meanings, related to the ideas which they have developed to make sense of their different life-experiences. The 'landmark' office block, whose image might support the managing director's liberating sense of being 'in command', might equally reinforce the typist's claustrophobic feeling of being reduced to a small cog in the corporate machine. Through its ideological dimension, the place suggests opportunities to the one but mostly constraints to the other.

Ultimately, neither the physical nor the ideological structuring of space can determine what people do: even a prison needs its gaolers to make its inmates into prisoners, and even the Berlin Wall needed its guards. Together, however, these physical and ideological factors do offer opportunities and they do exert constraints. These opportunities and constraints may have only a trivial importance in the case of most individual rooms. But

4 Introduction

when the rooms are combined to make up whole buildings, and when the buildings are assembled into cities, the cumulative pattern of opportunities and constraints has important social and economic impacts, looming large in many people's lives. To take an extreme example, the Pruitt-Igoes of the world are not demolished because there is no demand for the low-rent housing they contain. They are demolished because they provide low-rent housing in an inappropriate form – a form which, in the social context concerned, offers too few opportunities which people might call on to improve their lives, and which imposes too many constraints on people's efforts to deal with the particular economic and social problems which they face.

The physical form of the urban environment, then, is not some sort of designer add-on to 'real' social issues. It is a central aspect of the social world itself, contributing to the constitution of that world through every dimension from the economic through the biotic to the aesthetic. And, in many people's experience, it has somehow gone wrong through the cumulative impacts of recent urban development. Somehow, we have to find ways of working towards better-loved places.

Whenever we try to decide how the future ought to be, we are essentially dealing in predictions, and we know as a matter of fact that most predictions turn out to be wrong. Because cities affect all our lives in important ways, we need the best predictions we can get. Since urban systems are so complex, good predictions will have to incorporate knowledge and ideas from many different fields. They are much more likely to arise from a wide-ranging debate between people from all sorts of different backgrounds, than from the thoughts of any single individual, no matter how wise. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to propose a framework of ideas to help in provoking a debate around four main questions. First, what is the most helpful *conceptual framework* for thinking about the processes of urban transformation? Second, how does this framework help us understand how these processes generate their particular *product*: the forms and patterns of land use which typify recent urban places? Third, what *common ground for change* can we identify, as the practical basis for widespread action towards better-loved and more sustainable places? Finally, *how can we make these changes happen?* The book's four parts address these questions in turn.