

# The Built Environment: A Planning Approach to the Study of Past Urban Settlement

Norman E. P. Pressman

Number 2-73, October 1973

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020592ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020592ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pressman, N. E. P. (1973). The Built Environment: A Planning Approach to the Study of Past Urban Settlement. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (2-73), 8–13. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020592ar>

## APPROACHES TO THE URBAN PAST

The following four articles represent a precis of the session "Approaches to the Urban Past" held at the C.H.A. Conference in Kingston in June of this year. The papers were edited by the *Review* editors. Copies of the originals may be obtained by writing directly to the authors. It is the hope of the editors that they have rendered the original ideas of the contributors in a form that does at least partial justice to their original manuscripts.

. . . . .

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: A PLANNING APPROACH  
TO THE STUDY OF PAST URBAN SETTLEMENT

*Introduction*

"The premise of this paper is to establish, in a tentative manner, the planner's approach<sup>1</sup> regarding historical human settlement, within the context of what is more broadly referred to as 'urban history'. It will attempt to describe...some of the characteristics of planning concerns, with emphasis on the particular contribution which this discipline may lend in studying the urban past." That is, the urban past will be seen from the vantage point of the *urban planning* historian, with the understanding that urban planning history, though in the minds of some identical with urban history, "brings to bear a unique contribution of its own."

At least until the philanthropic and social reforms of the past century, planning had been thought of as a "broad physical synthesis", but with progress in science and technology, there occurred a tendency toward specialization. Despite this tendency much of the knowledge passed down to us by scholars of town building and planning has dealt largely with the city's physical achievements rather than with the political, economic or social circumstances in which they were realized,

and the bias of the author in his definition of planning - historically speaking - is also a physical one. That is not to deny the importance of other factors but only to state that "the in-depth concern with the *structure* and *form* of the city and its hinterland, is the unique contribution which planners can bring to the already existing approaches which study the historical city." In brief, "...the planner is largely concerned with those interactions of the *visible* and *material* substance of the perceptible world, as well as with the influencing processes."

*Historical Models for Planning:  
A Polemic for the Uses of History in Dealing with Urban Problems*

Broadly speaking it is possible to develop a "shorthand for the shape of the town" in the form of two models: the *Functional* and the *Historical*. In some respects they represent the valid distinction which can be drawn between "artifacts that are the result of the application of the laws of physical science and those which are the result of mimesis and intuition," keeping in mind, of course, that artifacts have "not only a 'use' value in the crudest sense, but also an 'exchange' value." In spite of the development of the scientific method "...we must still attribute...*social* or *iconic* values to the products of technology, and recognize that they play an essential role in the generation and development of the physical tools of our environment." "This fact is usually concealed from us because the intentions of the creative process are often 'hidden' in the overt details of performance specifications." In other words, "our senses of place and relationship in, say, an urban setting, or for that matter, in a building, are not dependent on any objective fact that is measurable. They are experiential and phenomenal." In a real sense they are independent of the quantifiable facts of the environment, though related to them.

Further, it is generally in the power of all artifacts to become icons. It is as true for trains and planes as it is of cathedrals. "We must, therefore, look upon the aesthetic and iconic qualities of artifacts as being due, not so much to an inherent property, but to a sort of availability of redundancy in them in relation to *human feeling*."

Given that the artifact is both icon and art, it becomes very important to note that the contemporary planner still has a wide choice available even when the functional determinants are satisfied. "Planners, in such situations, necessarily find themselves resorting back to intuitional processes in order to assist them in urban decision making, particularly as concerns the urban configuration of city design." "In modern planning theory, this choice has generally been conceived of as based on intuition working in a cultural vacuum." It would appear to be obvious, however, "...that the area of pure intuition must be based on a knowledge of past solutions to related problems (except where this is absolutely impossible), and that the art of city design may be a process of *adapting forms derived either from past needs or on past aesthetic ideologies to the needs of the present.*" It would mean "...not only that we are not free from the forms of the past, and from the availability of these forms as typological models, but that, if we assume we are free, we have lost control over a very active sector of our imagination and of our power to communicate with others." "City planning is affected by the history of ideas, *e.g.* the Utopian movement as expressed throughout the various historical periods, and the use of these ideas lies also in the making of historical models for planning. Decisive strategies can be obtained from history through a thorough examination of those ideas found in these formal models."

In many cases the design of buildings, especially honorific ones, and their location in a city becomes symbolic, not only of a city but of a period, and "...in studying the symbolic aspect of the city, the planning approach to history can be of inestimable value..." "If the environment is symbolized (as some believe it is), then the organization of space may be seen as the making visible of some ideal environments. In this process, socio-cultural considerations become dominant and aspects such as climate, topography, economics, communications and the like become secondary or modifying factors." The importance of the former consideration is exemplified in the cultural gap between the futuristic-functionalist planning model so important to the Americans compared with the historical model retained by the French. Likewise the single-family detached house in North America is as much a symbol of a dream as it is of utilitarian

value. Stylistic details, like quasi-Greek columns, are rooted in past forms and associations. High urban densities, with a positive value in many European cities and a negative one in most North American centres, reflect the influence of cultural values in city organization and policy formation. "All of these images, values and concepts, in attracting meaning, fall back on historical precedent...." Moreover, there is evidence that symbols and forms have shown a remarkable constancy over long periods of time and "that the historical model is a 'living' one," though such constancy is more relevant at some scales, like the neighborhood, than others, like the megalopolis. As Lewis Mumford observed, the city has changed little since 2,000 B.C., when all its physical organs were already present. "There are striking similarities in the forms of urban-spatial organization many thousands of years and miles apart. These similarities and typologies can be of immediate use to planners today, and a thorough study of the historical city, from the viewpoint of settlement form, can result in a major contribution by the planning discipline towards a better documentation and understanding of urban historical forces." Finally, "the aesthetic fact cannot be negated in the study of urban history. While the social, cultural, political and economic thrusts are invariably inter-related, and shed much light on the shape of cities, form is often a construct of the imaginative and creative powers."

*Urban Planning History: Findings of a More Scientific Nature*

Though the study of the city through analysis of its physical organization appears largely unscientific, that organization itself is a valuable historical document. The town plan, for example, "...will often provide clues about human behavior and activity in the past...." And the "visual and form characteristics of cities have been carefully analyzed, in a scientific manner, especially where the vague question of human *scale* in city planning is brought up." In addition, urban planners in the past have actually "hypothesized 'laws' of civic planning and design," an excellent example being the so-called "Laws of the Indies", proclaimed by Philip of Spain in 1573,<sup>2</sup> that were intended to establish uniform standards and procedures for the planning of towns and their

surrounding lands, as well as for all other details of Spanish colonial settlement. "The planning aspects of these laws prove an absolute necessity for understanding the urban forms which were used by the Spanish in those areas settled by them."

Despite the findings of a more scientific nature, "what is badly needed are optical keys, or aesthetic cues, to aid the majority of planners so that their work will be of greater and more relevant value. In spite of information available on systems for ordering the environment, the city remains a three-dimensional phenomenon which, in the end, must be experienced. Its character cannot be created, or even barely understood, by the mere manipulation and interpretation of statistical data, and the allocation of space by so-called 'functional considerations' alone. On the contrary, these functional requirements must find their expression within the formal framework of definite spatial relationships, representing the body of the city as an aesthetic entity. Man can comprehend the abstract logic of statistical rationalization only with great difficulty, whereas he can more easily grasp visual and spatial relationships, the meanings of which become even more enhanced by filling them with functional content. This is the essence of city design - at least, its physical component. Man cannot live by science and technology alone. Art, the stirring of the soul, is equally within the realm of human needs. The sooner society is able to view the city within this frame of reference, the more elevating and meaningful urban life is likely to be."

Planners and designers "...should ask why and in what ways space has been organized in order to obtain insights into what needs to be done. An approach of this nature may often help to explain patterns and desires which seem to make little sense otherwise. It may also help to clarify the relation between images, signs, symbols, needs, social organization, constancy and change - and the physical forms of the environment. It may serve both as an analytical tool and as a source of insight and inspiration. Hopefully, it may also assist related disciplines and expand the ways in which 'urban history' may be viewed and studied."

Norman E.P. Pressman

## FOOTNOTES

1. The term planning is used synonymously with 'urban or city and regional planning' (North American usage) and 'town and country planning' (British usage). No distinction is drawn between these.
2. For a brief summary, see John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton, 1969). For greater detail, see Zelia Nuttall, "Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 15, 1922.

. . . . .

## APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE URBAN PAST: GEOGRAPHY

What I have to say, then, is more about what "geographers" are doing than about geography. A central struggle among geographers now is between the ecological/behavioural perspective and the planning/political view. By ecological I mean a tendency toward reductionist view of human existence, an uncritical acceptance of processes operating below the surface of consciousness, notably competition.<sup>1</sup> This connotes "economic man" who defines self-interest in the narrowest of terms. Behaviouralism, a more recent development, while more subtle, says much the same: man the manipulator. Society is made up of a bunch of individuals who adapt and sort themselves out by competition. This may overstate the position of Robert Park and Edward Burgess, the classical writers of urban ecology,<sup>2</sup> but it has been the basic thrust of most studies on urban geography. A rejoinder to my proposition, namely that the ecologist's view of North America cities fits the American ideology, can be countered by another proposition that the students of ecology not only describe conditions, but imply a normative state. Everybody has to adjust if we follow them. Besides, North American cities have not always followed the ecologist's descriptions.

The alternative approach is that of politics and planning. This view cannot deny the dominance of competitiveness in our society, and so there can be a continuity with the ecological/behavioural, but it brings out conscious stances. This view may be seen as a continuation of the decision making and process concern of behaviouralists, yet it is a jump