

Everyday Life, Morphology and Urban Conservation

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Change

Wei-Kuang Liu
The University of Edinburgh (UK)

Abstract

Urban change is an inevitable process of urban growth, yet it must be properly managed so as to maintain the overall cultural character of a place, which is understood to be a 'sense of place'. In practice, urban conservation is probably today's most noticeable approach to such management. It is the philosophy of managing the tension between continuity and change in the city, an approach that can determine the sense of a place and establish the precursors for the long-term character of the city. In conservation theory, 'sense of place' is often understood as the emotional feelings for the overall traditional character, national identity, or existing socio-cultural atmosphere of a place. That is to say, the sense of place informing urban conservation practice is mainly derived from the cultural traditions of a place. Moreover, urban conservation practices are often founded on studies of urban morphology, that is, studies of the process and agents of change. The morphological approach allows the capturing of a sense of place or *genius loci* by mapping the historic-geographical attributes of the city. This approach further suggests that urban form and the nature of urban culture are inseparable from the historic fabric and traditional character of the place.

However, because the meaning of architecture resides not only in the spatial creative process but also in the practice of human reinterpretation, it is unceasingly renewed by everyday narratives with their own tactics. Thus, the cultural meaning of architecture is derived not only from its historicity, but also from today's everyday life practice. These everyday narratives endow the space with cultural meaning and produce the cultural character of a place, the sense of place. This sense of place, unlike the historic traditional sense of place, emerges from the everyday human experience of a place through time – the repetitious sense of time emphasizing the daily reiterated living stories in certain places. Today's practice of everyday life in fact creates more significant cultural meanings and sense of place than does the history of the place. Therefore this paper

suggests that such a sense of place has to be taken into account in the management of urban change. Yet these everyday human tactics are inconstant and unpredictable, and thus cannot be structurally represented or mapped. This mobility suggests empirical observations rather than mapping approaches for grasping the sense of place generated from today's everyday life practice so as to protect its incubator, the fabrics that stimulate the occurrence of these everyday behaviours. Accordingly, this paper suggests that, in order to maintain the cultural vitality of a place, an examination of the cultural character of architecture must involve not only studies of architectural and urban history, but also observations of everyday narratives, so as to grasp and prolong both the historic and contemporary cultural character of a city.

Introduction

'Sense of place' and cultural identity have been prominent subjects in recent studies of place due to concerns from scholars such as Edward C. Relph over their disappearance in the global placeless approach of modernism.¹ Yet places are constructed by individual stories of present traces and in this sense are never 'finished' but always 'becoming'.² Thus the identity of a place will never be assimilated into a broader outlook favouring a global focus as long as such everyday cultural effects exist. Yet since the concept of place is not constant, there are changes. This has caused conflicts and tensions over the discussions of the issue of change. What is to be conserved? What is to be changed? How much can be changed? In order to maintain a 'sense of place' while allowing urban change, these questions are increasingly discussed in the urban policy-making process. Regarding the management and examination of such tensions, urban conservation and morphology appear to be the most significant approaches. They examine the meanings of urban elements through studies of the transitions of an urban form and its past socio-cultural setting so as to provide decision-making criteria. That is to say, both urban conservation and

morphology search for the nature of the 'sense of place' through the cultural-historical context of a place. This approach can also be found in many ethnological works that focus on everyday life stories in certain places, as these works also suggest that the ways of our everyday life are derived from historical traditions. However, is the cultural form of a place merely the effect of history? In some places, the everyday life style that creates a certain cultural character is separate from the history of the place. For instance, in many Asian cities, chaotic neon signboards with modern skyscrapers and a large number of motorbikes in streets create distinctive urban cultural atmospheres (Figure 1); these cultural characters are mainly embedded in everyday narratives rather than in history or tradition. The responses of society to urban symbolic systems also provide significant cultural meaning to place.³ Yet since urban conservation is the primary approach to the management of urban change, once the place has historic value, most of its everyday cultural character will be eliminated in order to maintain the authenticity and integrity of its historic 'sense of place'; once they have no historic value, these fabrics and characters can be arbitrarily changed. Although today's life styles are often more influential than historical traditions in making the sense of a place,⁴ they are always in a passive position. In order to discuss further the role of such an everyday sense of place in the management of urban change, explorations must involve not only works on urban history and conservation, but also studies of cultural geography and architectural phenomenology. Before probing the issues of the everyday sense of a place, this paper will examine the concepts of urban conservation and morphology.



Fig 1: Taiwan street scene (author's photograph)

Urban Conservation and Urban Change

'Urban areas must change, or they will stagnate'.⁵ Urban change is apparently an inevitable process for urban growth. Yet we do

not destroy entire existing fabrics for this change, as we always maintain memorable and valuable properties. Thus, there is always a tension between continuity and change in the city. In this case, we must have a proper mechanism to deal with such tension. How do we decide if they are valuable? For whom do we conserve? Urban conservation is thus the philosophy to manage such decision-making issues; it also provides a political approach to the selection processes that ultimately shape our cultural heritage.⁶ It functions through the process of prolonging the lives of valuable cultural assets by nominating them as 'heritage' while allowing other elements deemed unimportant for conservation to stimulate urban growth. Since heritage is determined by selection, it becomes a commodity for popular consumption. Thus, the criteria for the selection process must be founded on present-day social values.⁷ In other words, the intrinsic values of the heritage, whether in memory, aesthetics, use or identity, are in fact judged by today's axiological cognitions. Heritage is hence conserved for contemporary political and economic purposes, or everyday social demands. Since these values are contingent upon changes in social values, heritage is not a constant concept. Yet although its concept is not constant, heritage is necessarily connected to its historicity or past cultural contexts, as it refers to elements from the past and accumulated cultural productivity, e.g. high culture, as well as the 'collective memory' of a place.⁸

Moreover, the aim of urban conservation is to decide the overall character of a place so as to suggest the precursors for the long-term nature of the city.⁹ Urban conservation is thus often considered as the most appropriate approach to manage the cultural characters of an urban landscape. As a result, the concept of heritage involves not only tangible historic fabrics, but also intangible cultural traditions as well as a 'sense of place' so as to maintain the genius loci of a given environment. Since heritage must have historic value, 'sense of place' is often understood as the human emotional feelings for the overall traditional character, national identity, or existing socio-cultural atmosphere of a place.¹⁰ In addition, the concept of 'sense of place' has been much appreciated also because of its respect for the conditions of heritage's authenticity and integrity in contemporary conservation practice. In general, issues of authenticity only emerge when the object is a finished commodity or a static element.¹¹ Since the concept of place is not constant, it is impossible to identify the authentic character of a place. However, as Gunilla Jivén and Peter J. Larkham indicate, 'sense

of place' provides the profile of the overall character of a place for the test of its authenticity.¹² Here, the measure of authenticity allows change as long as this profile still links to its traditional character. Furthermore, the integrity of 'sense of place' must be persistently protected. Contemporary urban conservation practices thus manage urban change through such a manner so as to achieve the aim of cultural continuity while allowing change to happen.

Urban Morphology and Urban Change

Urban morphology is the study of the historical geography of the urban form. It focuses on the process and agents of change so as to identify the morphological character of the city as well as its *genius loci*, or 'sense of place'.¹³ Thus, in the city, the historical socio-cultural context is very influential to its morphological changes. Such studies assist us to understand the role of urban elements in contemporary development so that we have the foundation for presumptions in discussions of the issues of urban change. Since morphological studies can help to identify the present-day values of historic elements, they often act as an important analytical device for urban conservation practices. According to M.R.G. Conzen, perhaps the best known author on urban morphology in the UK, the cityscape is like a palimpsest; it shows the historic socio-cultural stratification created through an unceasingly repeated process in which part of the existing fabrics are replaced with new fabrics while the other parts are maintained.¹⁴ The urban form is therefore the representation of the synthesis of the socio-cultural contexts in each historic period. Thus, the shape of a city is inseparable from its social traditions. In addition, in order to show respect for such a process of morphological change, schemes of recycling old spaces for new functions are always suggested so as to equip the place for modern life while protecting its sense of place.¹⁵

In the Conzenian approach, we can grasp the morphological characters of a city by mapping its historico-geographical attributes on the urban plans, building fabrics, and land utilization patterns.¹⁶ These patterns can represent the socio-cultural transitions of each period, and thus such an approach helps to grasp 'the identification of formative processes and the geographical results in the townscape'.¹⁷ As a result, we can identify the spirit or symbolic characters of a place according to such morphological mapping. Moreover, the study of urban morphology is not merely for identifying the historic 'sense of place', but also for understanding the reasons for change. Explorations of agents of change help in grasping the principles and

logics of urban change so as to provide references for the contemporary management approach to urban change.¹⁸

Everyday Life and Architecture

The cultural character of a place is not merely derived from its historical socio-cultural context, but also from today's everyday life practice. This can be explained through the relationship between form and social practice in architecture. As Bernard Tschumi argues, 'performance art seemed a natural extension of conceptual art. These two forms of art practice echoed [the] definition of architecture: as concept and experience, or the definition of space and the movement of bodies within it'.¹⁹ In this concept, the meaning of architecture resides not only in the spatial creative process, but also in the practice of human reinterpretation. Thus, architecture is not a backdrop for human actions, but the action itself.²⁰ In this sense, although the authenticity of the architectural-physical fabrics is rendered in its inherited historic form, the meaning of architecture does not reside in this building context, as the everyday narratives unceasingly renew their meanings with their own tactics. Accordingly, the nature of the cultural character of architecture is derived not only from its historicity, but also from today's everyday life practice.

Following this argument, the urban landscape with its historic 'sense of place' protected by an urban conservation approach provides the basis for the appropriation of everyday events, while these everyday narratives endow the space with cultural meanings. As architectural phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz suggests, 'man is an integral part of the environment. To belong to a place means to have an existential foothold, in a concrete everyday sense'.²¹ Philosopher Michel de Certeau also argues that the everyday practice of re-appropriated space produces the cultural meaning of place.²² The meaning of place is thus inseparable from the practice of everyday life. Geographer Doreen Massey further emphasizes that 'sense of place' is mainly derived from contemporary human everyday life practice in a place, separate from its historicity.²³ In other words, a sense of place is not only derived from the emotional feelings towards the existing environment, but also from the practices of everyday life. What is more, the style of human life practice is often influenced by an existing sense of place. Therefore, as philosopher J.E. Malpas notes, a place and its cultural context are in fact formed by each other.²⁴

Furthermore, Stan Allen stresses that our everyday experience of a place through time, rather than through space, is often more noticeable because time is the most important factor that enables the stories to happen.²⁵ When exploring issues of urban change, we should consider not only the historical time that makes past stories and traditions, but also everyday time. Unlike morphological changes, everyday changes do not emphasize chronic changes but repeated changes.²⁶ For instance, daily events like the morning market or evening market create repeated living experiences in certain places. We also often repeat certain stories, such as commuting, which generates certain social meanings around the place we experience. In addition, places with the same social function can create different social values when they are situated in different everyday moments. For example, the types of visitors to morning markets and to evening markets are different, thus producing different social meanings to the markets. Such everyday social significance cannot be shown merely through mapping the markets on the map. In fact, everyday human tactics are inconstant and unpredictable, and thus they are unmappable.²⁷ As Jacques Derrida remarks, 'in an architectural work, the representation is not structurally representational'.²⁸ Mapping appears not to be a proper approach to the study of the everyday sense of place.

Conclusions

'Sense of place' resides not only in the historicity but also in the contemporary everyday context of a place. Since the everyday sense of place has an important role in the cultural vitality and identity of the city, it should not always exist passively. We implement urban conservation policy because we yearn to grasp the historic sense of place actively and at the same time, retain an element of control over the management of its quality. But, how do we manage to protect the everyday cultural character of a place? This question demands further exploration. An important consideration in such exploration is that conserving the everyday cultural context of a place will only restrict its capacity for change; instead, we should protect the incubator of such an everyday sense of place. To be precise, in the practice of managing urban change, we must take into account the fabrics that stimulate the occurrence of these human everyday behaviours. To this end, this paper suggests that the methodology of empirical observations can be of help. Observations of the process and agents of everyday human tactics and their interactions with the architectural environment will help us to grasp the incubators of the sense of place.²⁹ Following the discussions throughout

the paper, it can be noted that a complete proposal on the management of urban change must involve both historical and everyday human experiences of the city. Therefore, when exploring the issues of urban change, empirical approaches to everyday life are as important as morphological studies. Both methods should be held together to grasp the sense of place derived from the historic, cultural, and social value of a city.

Notes

- 1 Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, Research in Planning and Design, London: Pion, 1976, p. 90.
- 2 Allan R. Pred, 'Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74, 2 (1984): 279.
- 3 Philippe Panerai, Jean Castex, Jean-Charles Depaule, and Ivor Samuels, *Urban Forms: The Death and Life of the Urban Block*, Oxford: Architectural Press, 2004, p. 124.
- 4 A sense of place is inseparable from the practice of everyday life, but separate from the historicity of a place. See Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place,' in Trevor J. Barnes & Derek Gregory (eds.), *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry*, London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 315-23.
- 5 Peter J. Larkham, *Conservation and the City*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 3.
- 6 J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester: Wiley, 1996, pp. 8-9.
- 7 G. J. Ashworth, 'From History to Heritage: From Heritage to Identity: In Search of Concepts and Models,' in G. J. Ashworth & P. J. Larkham (eds.), *Building a New Heritage: Tourism, Culture and Identity in the New Europe*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 15-16.
- 8 Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, pp. 1-2.
- 9 Larkham, *Conservation and the City*, pp. 17-18; Dennis Rodwell, *Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, p. ix.
- 10 G. J. Ashworth and B. J. Graham, *Senses of Place: Senses of Time*, Aldershot, England; Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2005, p. 3; M. R. G. Conzen, 'Historical Townscapes in Britain: A Problem in Applied Geography,' in G. H. J. Daysh & John William House (eds.), *Northern Geographical Essays in Honour of G.H.J. Daysh*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Oriel Press, 1967, pp. 56-57; Gunila Jivén and Peter J. Larkham, 'Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character: A Commentary,' *Journal of Urban Design*, 8, 1 (2003): 68-70.
- 11 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 302; Jukka Jokilehto, 'Considerations on Authenticity and Integrity in the World Heritage Context,' *Journal of Edinburgh Architecture Research*, 30 (2006): 9.
- 12 Jivén and Larkham, 'Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character,' p. 78.
- 13 The term 'sense of place' is widely and interchangeably referred to as the genius loci. See Jivén and Larkham, 'Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character,' p. 79.
- 14 M. R. G. Conzen, *Thinking About Urban Form: Papers on Urban Morphology, 1932-1998*, Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 51.
- 15 M. R. G. Conzen and J. W. R. Whitehand, *The Urban Landscape: Historical Development and Management*, London: Academic Press, 1981, pp. 84-85.
- 16 Conzen, *Thinking About Urban Form*, p. 30.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Larkham, *Conservation and the City*, p. 29.
- 19 Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi with Ana Miljacki et al., '2 Architects, 10 Questions on Program,' *Praxis*, 8 (2007): 10.
- 20 Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 1994, p. 149.
- 21 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1980, p. 23.
- 22 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1984,

pp. 117-18. (Although the meanings of 'space' and 'place' in de Certeau's explanation are opposite to common formulations, they provide the same sense as the common ideas in other scholars' explanations.)

- 23 Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place,' pp. 315-23.
- 24 J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 35-36.
- 25 Stan Allen, *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000, p. 40.
- 26 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, London: Athlone Press, 2000, p. 18.
- 27 Allen, *Architecture, Technique and Representation*, p. 45; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 99.
- 28 Jacques Derrida, 'The Parergon,' *October*, 9 (1979): 22.
- 29 The works of Panerai and Castex serve as good examples for such an approach (See Panerai et al., *Urban Forms*). My paper does not attempt to link such a conclusion to any specific School but to urge urban morphologists to consider various possibilities involving empirical studies.

Bibliography

- Stan Allen, *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000.
- G. J. Ashworth, 'From History to Heritage: From Heritage to Identity: In Search of Concepts and Models,' in G. J. Ashworth & P. J. Larkham (eds.), *Building a New Heritage: Tourism, Culture and Identity in the New Europe*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- G. J. Ashworth and B. J. Graham, *Senses of Place: Senses of Time*, Aldershot, England; Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2005.
- M. R. G. Conzen, 'Historical Townscapes in Britain: A Problem in Applied Geography,' in G. H. J. Daysh & John William House (eds.), *Northern Geographical Essays in Honour of G.H.J. Daysh*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Oriel Press, 1967.
- . *Thinking About Urban Form: Papers on Urban Morphology, 1932-1998*, Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004.
- M. R. G. Conzen and J. W. R. Whitehand, *The Urban Landscape: Historical Development and Management*, London: Academic Press, 1981.
- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1984.
- Jacques Derrida, 'The Parergon,' *October*, 9 (1979): 3-41.
- David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Gunila Jivén and Peter J. Larkham, 'Sense of Place, Authenticity and Character: A Commentary,' *Journal of Urban Design*, 8, 1 (2003): 67-81.
- Jukka Jokilehto, 'Considerations on Authenticity and Integrity in the World Heritage Context,' *Journal of Edinburgh Architecture Research*, 30 (2006): 7-12.
- Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi with Ana Miljacki et al., '2 Architects, 10 Questions on Program,' *Praxis*, 8 (2007): 6-15.
- Peter J. Larkham, *Conservation and the City*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, London: Athlone Press, 2000.
- J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place,' in Trevor J. Barnes & Derek Gregory (eds.), *Reading Human*

- Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry, London: Arnold, 1997.
- Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1980.
- Philippe Panerai, Jean Castex, Jean-Charles Depaule, and Ivor Samuels, *Urban Forms: The Death and Life of the Urban Block*, Oxford: Architectural Press, 2004.
- Allan R. Pred, 'Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74, 2 (1984): 279-97.
- Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, Research in Planning and Design, London: Pion, 1976.
- Dennis Rodwell, *Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.
- Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 1994.
- J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester: Wiley, 1996.