

URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS:*a history of design ideas*

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Dr. Julienne Hanson

University College London, London, United Kingdom

*'The superordinate question facing planners today is integration versus segregation.'**Personal Space, Robert Sommer, p153.*

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0 Abstract

Following the maxim that 'the best wine comes in old bottles' this presentation will explore some ideas that were first put together during the late 1970s, whilst 'space syntax' was still in gestation. Parts of the argument may already be familiar, as they were published in the 'Social Logic of Space' and because they have informed much of the Space Syntax Laboratory's subsequent published work on the 'pathology' of twentieth century social housing. However, most of what will be presented has not been placed in the public domain before. It is a small but essential missing piece of the jigsaw: nevertheless, one that we believe has been very influential in changing the way in which people talk about and design residential areas in the UK and in the USA today.

Keywords:

*Dr Julienne Hanson
The Bartlett School of Graduate Studies
(Torrington Place Site)
University College London, Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT, England*

*tel (44) (0)171 391 1740
fax (44) (0)171 813 4363
email j.hanson@ucl.ac.uk
www <http://www.spacesyntax.com>*

The ideas were developed concurrently with axial and convex analysis but before computers and quantitative techniques. In fact, the case study that will be presented in detail served as a test-bed for syntactic analysis, to see if axial and convex representations could help pin down the morphological changes that had clearly taken place in the design of housing in a small Inner London neighbourhood, Somers Town, over a timespan of about a hundred years. In essence, the change was from 'streets', which seemed rather similar to one another, to housing 'estates', which seemed very different from one another. Yet although the various housing schemes that were studied in detail looked very heterogeneous, we were able to detect a consistent line of development in their spatial layouts that was so strong and generic that we felt we had to give it a name - 'the new urban genotype'. It will be argued that the origins of this genotype can be traced back to assumptions about social class, gender and ethnicity that took many years to develop and which have now been obscured by more recent debates.

With hindsight, we have to revise this to the 'modernist' urban genotype because architecture has moved on and now, in the UK at least, we try design things that are very different from the estate layouts of Somers Town. The presentation will try to explain 'how' and 'why', by unfolding the story that lies behind the design ideas and by bringing it up to date. The argument will be consolidated in two ways: by providing a more complete and quantitative syntactic analysis of the 1970s examples, and by showing how the changes in the way we think about housing in the 1990s have had an impact on contemporary housing in Somers Town, and in what has become the paradigm for the latest generation of design ideas, Hulme in Manchester. Finally, it will be argued that it is essential for architects and urban designers to understand how social ideas about inequalities in power and control get built into our frameworks and assumptions, and why, in the final analysis, architecture cannot be divorced from politics.

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The account will rely largely on simple syntactic techniques not previously published and which are not at all 'high-tech'. One important message is that it is not necessary to use 'high-tech' methods to theorise, though theory is essential to interpret analytic findings and to translate them into design guidance. Indeed, one of the problems that may arise with the current generation of housing design guidance is that it has simply replaced one set of normative assumptions with another - this time based on the 'syntactic' concepts of permeability, integration and constitutedness. This last, incidentally, is a property that has been rather neglected in analysis, particularly in urban analysis based on axial maps, but it is fundamental to experience. The stated social objectives of the most recent paradigm are democracy and empowerment but, as these were also said to underpin the previous 'modernist' urban genotype, we need to be ever vigilant in order to ensure that we do not deceive ourselves about the origins and consequences of design ideas for the future of urban society.

The answer to Robert Sommer's question posed above used to be thoroughgoing and uncompromising 'segregation'; now it is 'integration'. Today, permeability, integration and constitutedness are like 'motherhood and apple pie'. As design principles, it is assumed that they can 'do no wrong'. This ought to be a good thing for 'space syntax' since it was syntax that first drew attention to the importance of these properties in the first place. However, even if we grant that today's political agenda has indeed changed for the better, unless designers and critics understand that all of these properties, even when applied at the neighbourhood scale, are global not local, there is a danger that, with the test of time, some of today's radical, new designs might be judged to have 'got it wrong' once again, and that would be a disaster not only for the people who have to live there but also for architectural theory.