Editorial

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A key element in our consciousness is the place-setting for our experiences. Place is differentially important in all that we do and that is done to us. Many people experience the 'close-up' experience of high emotion that pushes place into background soft focus, closing the cinematic lens to exclude the place-setting, when the directly interpersonal takes precedence, or the 'intra-personal' causes us to look inward to scan the databases of our mind and memory. Yet memories of place prior to and post such experiences – positive and negative – usually remain a formidable key or trigger to recall and emotion.

For most of everyday life and memory, place, with its physical texture, touch, sound and smell is vitally important in framing and modifying experiences repeated in different places. Modernity has brought with it the 'iconography' of the branded commonplace. The producers of one of the most famous soft drinks of our time subtly and less subtly promote the place enhancement and experiential enhancement of the sign and substance of its product. The producers of a famous alcoholic beverage have for many years promoted the image and logo of its product in place scenarios that may well continue to capture the imagination of the international travelling public of the 21st century. In various media from literature, theatre and film to painting and music, the evocation of place depends on a range of approaches from iconic signal to detailed brushstrokes.

But let us not over-egg the argument: despite reasonable reservations about 'place' as a focus for urban design and regeneration, place is demonstrably important in our responses to the settings for both the ordinary and extraordinary practices of everyday life.

In this issue, we start out with a paper that returns to the concepts of place, non-place and placelessness, as explored by a group of students at the

University of Cincinnati. Mahyar Arefi used these concepts with a mixed group of undergraduate and postgraduate students in a course on reading the American city. In his paper, Arefi reviews the work *inter alia* of key contributors to the 'interdisciplinary dialogue' that has characterised scholarly debate on this subject. He then moves to a discussion of some examples of the student work. Not surprisingly the students' perceptions of what might be termed the place/placelessness continuum were sometimes 'fuzzy' at the margins. However, he concludes that the concepts offer a device for interpreting the dynamics of the American city.

In her paper, Shatha Malhis is also concerned with the identity of the city. She focuses on the changes that have arisen as a result of the 1970s oil-boom in Amman, and in particular on the impact this has had on the form and aesthetics of the villas that have proliferated in the city over the last three decades. She reviews past research concerned primarily with the reading of facades in terms of aesthetics. She goes on in her analysis of modern villas to find an astonishing range of stylistic variety, albeit superimposed on a much less diverse and varied pattern of basic mass configurations. One of the most interesting aspects of this paper is the analysis based on the perceptions of different people to the diversity of form and aesthetic. This analysis enables Malhis to conclude that her research shows some unanticipated shared perceptions – not only between users/viewers but also between them and the architects and planners who often see themselves as the only legitimate form-givers. With significant justification she sees these 'shared schemata and the overlap of values' as a potential basis for design coding.

In a paper published in this journal in 1997, Robert Saliba discussed the contribution of the Prince of Wales' Urban Task Force in Beirut in the summer of that year at the invitation of the

Lebanese Prime Minister's Hariri Foundation and the development company, Solidere [(1997) 2(3), 155–168]. He concluded, among other things, that

... 'artificial visions' will clash not only with the urban fabric of the Old Medina but with its social fabric, leading to its gentrification. Tourists are more attracted by Old Sidon and its people, not the interpretation of its urban identity by designers. (p 168)

In a review of the outcomes of the 1994 design competition for proposals to reconstruct the souks of Beirut, Elie Haddad has sadly to conclude that this reconstruction remains only more or less, work in progress. As is so often the case, these defining, but 'ordinary', manifestations of local culture were regarded by the city authorities as anomalous in terms of the modern city and its functions. Thus, having largely survived the war of 1975–1991 they were demolished as part of the reconstruction and modernisation plans for the city. Haddad's account of the varying use of locally related morphologies and typologies by competition entrants is instructive; notably including Aldo Rossi's demonstrative creative leaps from an underlying use of the old street pattern to support incremental re-growth of the souks. He poses the concluding question: will the souks achieve a renaissance, and can urban designers and architects do anything to help to restore 'that condition of life that once constituted the spirit of a place?' Let us hope so.

We conclude with a paper on a matter that is much closer to the subject of the others in this

issue than it might at first appear, for it is significantly concerned with the development and management over time of good places for people. Town Centre Management in this country is a 'discipline' barely two decades old. As Reeve rightly indicates in his paper, while it owes much to earlier practices developed in the USA, UK practice is distinctive. Often in the past seen as an organised rearguard action by some significant retailers against the growing out-of-town offer, it has other dimensions – and much more potential in making and preserving better urban places for the full range of social interaction. It has been supported by downtown property owners, managers and local authorities, worried about the financial effects of town and city centre decline. This is first and foremost an issue of retailing and related facilities posed not only by straightforward out-of-town competition, but also by the negative image of the inner areas of our towns and cities and the comparative difficulty and expense of access by private car – seen in England, at least, as the *sine qua non* of a good retailing experience. In conclusion, Reeve is concerned about the missed opportunities of town centre management and raises a series of questions and issues that require more debate and research. The Deputy Prime Minister's laudable focus on creating sustainable communities should perhaps give slightly more emphasis to the mechanisms for sustainably managing our existing towns and cities.

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