Editorial

Real places used to be like real beer or real bread: commonplace, and made and consumed by the people of the locality using local materials, skills and other resources. The ordinary places and products were leavened with the special, related to the calendar, religion and – above all – the coming together of the citizenry: from the Lenten cakes of Andean Cusco to the beer of the Munich Oktoberfest. That, at least, is the mythology.

However, as we know, the past is a foreign country. Both historical fact and mythology demonstrate the importance over millennia of trade and global influence, from the Vinland voyagers to Polo and the Silk Route. The roofs of post-conquest South America were roofed in Spanish-style tiles from the sixteenth century and the roofs of England's East Anglian towns with Dutch from the seventeenth.

Perhaps the most important differentiating factor of the past from the present in human settlements is the relative deceleration of change in the way things were done as we look further and further back. Today we yearn for a sense of place – *genius loci* – by design. In the past the production and evolution of vernacular forms were slow. Until the end of the eighteenth century most cities and many towns supported the entire range of human endeavour for their inhabitants. Imported raw materials – whether from the hinterland or from Samarkand – were converted by manufacture, exchanged and consumed within the urban area. People lived, worked, traded and played within a geographically very limited area. Towns worked, and developed specialisms, but continued to bake and brew for local needs.

Few of us would want to go back to eighteenth century healthcare or sanitation, yet we hanker after the image and comfort of self-sustaining urbanism. In parts of the world – indeed in parts of Europe – this sort of local economy is only

just dying. In some places, tourism provides a doubtful life-support for a way of life that has degenerated to what is little more than a persistent vegetative state – the semblance of the old life without the cerebral or corporeal functions that make it real. So what can we expect of the notion of *genius loci* as a concern for urban design in the future?

After use-zoning, the internalization of human activity has contributed to the final destruction of the places of public assembly. Landscaped offices and shopping malls, leisure centres and food halls all provide internal environments for the everyday transactions of life that may be managed and imaged in accordance with consumer advertising. The outside is required only as a conduit for movement between venue, and is best traversed in the private car, or second best by a well-controlled and secure public transport system. Private security has rapidly replaced public policing in most pedestrian settings. The home recedes behind security barriers and alarm systems at the other end of the transit network: linked by cable to global TV and the Internet to Nepal and next door. Yet, by its very nature, the public realm remains the only potentially truly democratic space; and this public realm and its relationship to the geography and landscape of a settlement remain the key to a sense of place.

Tourism is like the vampire of horror stories. It promises perpetual life to the special subject and all too often results in the walking dead. Tourist imagery of places – the postcards and brochure pictures – is all about nature transformed: beaches, people, buildings, or people, streets and squares. The stage-set promise of tourism is generally bolstered by very few 'authentic' interiors, uses, transactions. Even in working locations – real places – tourism demands its own dedicated, safe and sanitized markets and restaurants, hotels and museums.

For a long time now, it has been suggested by some that, within a global context, towns should accept the role of 'living museum', as industry declines and a global economy fails to recognize the needs of local viability for ordinary people without substantial capital reserves or a significant stake in shares on the world market. However, selling keepsakes and charging for the opportunity to photograph folk in local costume will not sustain local economy. The safety of the consumer can also all too often lead to the tourism experience of Tokyo described by Fussell (1980) almost two decades ago:

The ostensible object [of a day-trip out of Tokyo] is to convey a group of tourists to a spot where they can wonder at the grandeurs of natural scenery. In pursuit of this end, they are first placed in a 'streamlined' train, whose speed of 130 miles per hour is frequently called to their attention. They are then transferred to an air-conditioned 'coach' which whisks them to a boat, whence, after a ten-minute ride, they are ushered into a funicular to ascend a spooky gorge, after which, back to the bus, etc. (p. 42)

A commonplace psychological diagram shows that the communication of a notion depends as much on the state of the receiver as on the transmitter. Fussell (ibid.) makes much of the transition over time of peripatetic observers from 'explorers' to 'travellers' to 'tourists', and the fact is that our perceptions of place are conditioned by the nature and duration of our experience of them. The more that our daily life is tied up with that of the locality, the richer our experience is likely to be. Reality requires real engagement. Urban designers forget or ignore this more often than many as they criss-cross the globe looking for solutions to local identity within a global market. The wish to headline or 'brand' the image (sic) of a city, in order to promote it in competition with others, holds all the dangers of other commercial advertising and promotion: in particular, the generalization of the consumer and the marginalization of any subtlety and complexity in the product. In our careful endeavours to identify and reinforce a real sense of place we need help from many areas of practice.

In the latter half of the twentieth century the creation of new settlements has presented a major challenge for designers in achieving places as acceptable to users as established towns. This issue starts with a pair of papers that review the development of the new town of Almere, and presents one scenario for its future growth. Hans Spaans provides an explanation of the foundation and growth of Almere to the present. The character of the town is rooted in the polder landscape with its easy access to the open countryside. Francine Houben presents the approach of Mecanoo to substantially expand the town in the period 2005–2050. She addresses the issues of new town identity, public transport and landscape.

As we have suggested, the relationship of tourism and place is potentially symbiotic and generally problematic. Daniel O'Hare shows how a cultural landscape approach can reveal fundamental information about image and place for the urban designer. His case study of Noosa on the east coast of Australia is informed by comparisons in and beyond the Australian tourist experience.

Urban designers often forget the importance of colour as a vital component in forming local identity. In his paper Tom Porter presents the approach of colour mapping. He uses international case studies to illustrate the generation of palettes that embody prevailing historic landscape and townscape colours for guiding future development.

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Reference

Fussell, P. (1980) *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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