Editorial

The relevance of the 'historic city' to the future of urban living is one of the recurrent fault lines in debates between urban designers, planners, developers and other built-environment specialists. For its advocates the historic city is a source of inspiration: a high-density model that sustains a walkable, energy efficient environment and resilient, mixed-use economy. For the sceptics, such an image offers no vision of the future because it stands contrary to the actual history of many contemporary cities where old centres have been affected by social and economic blight usually accompanied by acute physical deterioration. They claim that this indicates an irreversible process of decline that cannot be satisfactorily disguised by 'rebranding' historic centres as tourist destinations or celebrating the selective gentrification of prime urban locations. Instead, they propose, a radical thinking of conventional urban models is required to understand what will be needed in the twenty-first century.

This debate also distinguishes different traditions in urbanism. For example, Edward Glaeser's argument that – all things being equal – humans would opt to live in dense, information-rich settlements, belongs (broadly speaking) in the Jane Jacobs tradition (Glaeser, 2001). However, other voices such as Thomas Sieverts assert that new ways of conceiving of 'the urban' are necessary in order to fully understand and better design for the dispersed agglomerations of built form that are the characteristic milieu of highly mobile populations living in contemporary urban regions in the developed world (Sieverts, 2003). With some license, we might put Sieverts in the tradition of Ebenezer Howard or Lewis Mumford for whom the dense industrial city was a 'problem' requiring a 'solution' in which the accommodation of large open spaces within an extended urban fabric would play an important part.

The revolution in social and working practices associated with the internet and the widespread availability of portable telecommunication devices has created a new 'digital layer'. The relationship of this aspatial (or 'transpatial') network with the corporeal rhythms of urban space is as yet far from clear. Yet, the ever-imminent irrelevance of the 'urban variable' in the face of global economic transformation has been announced before and it would be prudent not to rush to this conclusion once again. The traditional urbanists undoubtedly have a point in claiming that globally speaking cities are more popular than ever before. In 1900, approximately 10 per cent of the world's population inhabited cities; by 2050 this number is expected to rise to 75 per cent (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007). However, this argument should not be taken to imply that the form and social life of the city are fundamentally unchanged over time and in different historical–geographical contexts. From a design perspective, there is as much danger in stunting innovation by idealizing the historical city as a universally applicable model as there is in imposing inappropriate contemporary schemes onto complex urban tissues that have evolved over many centuries.

Part of the 'postmodern condition' in western social theory is manifested in a suspicion of the grand modernist narratives of architecture and urban design, which have become associated with the destruction of those historical urban forms that are (now) highly valued. Nevertheless, in planning for the future, it is hard to do without the 'vision thing' entirely – as a necessary part of the design process. It is probably inevitable therefore, that the views of those who would rather 'leave things alone' are often incommensurate with those who see greater opportunities arising from top-down interventions. Much of the row over the huge Olympic developments in East London and their much-trumpeted 'legacy' for the local community has taken place on these terms – the cost being the displacement or disadvantaging of many existing local amenities and small businesses. Certainly, some historical areas seem to be more privileged than others and not necessarily the ones that matter most to the local populations who have the greatest need of them.

Although a highly mobile existence can liberate individuals from the weight of history, it can also be an alienating experience – especially if you are

poor or alone. The work of phenomenologists such as David Seamon emphasizes how people need to feel 'at home' in the world – a state that must be harder to achieve the less one is at rest (Seamon, 1979). Bearing this in mind, from a design perspective at what point does an intellectual reluctance to be nostalgic for the 'historic city' lead to a more or less uncritical acceptance of diffuse and/or substantially privatized urban forms as being somehow being 'inevitable' in market terms? By the same token, at what point does an advocacy of the historical city prevent one from acknowledging the economic dynamism and aspiration associated with many contemporary modes of urban living? A personal anecdote might be helpful in elucidating such questions; international subscribers to *UDI* are asked to forgive the geographical specificity of this account.

I was recently privileged to visit an old friend in Canterbury, one of England's most 'historic cities' – though properly regarded as a 'town' today – and a popular tourist attraction, not least as a key site in the history of the English Church. My friend, an Englishman, and his Chinese wife had recently returned to live in England after many years in China. Initially, they had opted to locate to a picturesque, though relatively remote, coastal location. Once *in situ*, the inconvenience of being isolated from useful sources of local information, essential services and the accessible distractions that are so important when settling into a new way of life with a young family, soon became apparent. Subsequently, they decided to move to Canterbury where, as a boy, my friend had been at school, though he no longer had any family or acquaintances living there.

My friend had rented a relatively inexpensive narrow nineteenth-century terrace house in the old (that is, intra-mural) centre of Canterbury with a staircase so steep that one was advised to climb it using hands, as if it were a ladder. The front room opens directly onto the street along which revellers occasionally pass by on their way to or from the public houses in town. Opposite is a smart double-fronted house of an earlier epoch that may originally have belonged to a wealthy merchant. The family who owns it today regularly opens their private garden for use by their neighbours. Opposite and to the right is the 'Old Synagogue', built in the Egyptian style and now used as a school music room. From the backyard of the terrace, the illuminated central tower of

Canterbury Cathedral (a World Heritage site) is visible late into the evening, its pealing bells clearly audible.

Without needing to book in advance, several members of our company took the opportunity to hear Handel's Messiah performed in the Cathedral by Canterbury Community Choir – the cheap tickets were bought by a large audience combining tourists and locals. The clear morphological boundaries marking out of the cathedral Precinct and the grounds of the fee-paying King's School Canterbury made it abundantly clear that this lively urban milieu concealed large differentials in the social and economic capital of individuals. Nevertheless, everyone who is resident in the old town has free access to the Precinct and some of the school grounds are also accessible – making the whole central area highly permeable. At all times, numerous shops, cafés, pubs and restaurants are only a short walk away. Through the sheer proximity of people and remarkable places the privileges of the city, to some extent at least, were available to anyone who lived there. It provided me with a real 'urban moment' – a reminder of why people have chosen to live in cities for millennia. In that moment, it is not the population threshold or specialization of 'functions' that defines urbanity *per se*, but rather a certain quality of intimacy with the world in which one lives, a quality that opens up possibilities rather than closing them down.

There are, of course, no clear-cut answers to the debate regarding historic centres as a model for future urbanism. Canterbury is certainly no 'ideal city'; it has the same range of socio-economic problems as most smaller urban centres in the United Kingdom. What impressed me during my trip, however, was that despite having lived there for such a short period of time, my hosts were already 'at home'. Canterbury itself was evidently key in giving rise to that feeling of 'at homeness'. For whatever reason, I concluded, this town (or at least the old part of it) is *easy to inhabit*. Whether this would necessarily remain the case for my mosts over a longer period of time is a different question. It seems reasonable to suggest that a historically compact urban area such as Canterbury can at least work as a good place 'to start'. Where accessibility to the city is not available or the city itself has severely declined, then it is not clear what other mode of life could offer such unmediated proximity to so many social resources. Some claim this potential for online social networks, but it is uncertain

whether the two can ever be easily separated (or indeed, whether they should be) as such networks are often used to maintain relationships made offline. 'Edge city' developments no doubt offer great economic opportunity, but at what potential cost to that sense of being 'at home'?

All this may sound like so much advocacy of the historic city model, but the point is rather to highlight: first, that a preference for the milieu of the historic city does not have to be justified on grounds of chocolate-box nostalgia, indeed it can be expressed in highly pragmatic terms; and second, to illustrate why the whole complexity of the historic city should not be casually reduced to that of a one-dimensional tourist destination when it is able to play such a formative role in 'modern lives' that are both highly mobile and digitally networked, as personally and professionally speaking is certainly the case with my hosts in Canterbury. It seems the challenge for the sceptics remains – that whereas more diffused, contemporary models of urbanism may indeed allow us (or at least some of us) almost unlimited scope to customize and control our preferred 'lifestyles', a still-functioning historic city makes relatively light the everyday work of living – such that one has simply more time for other things. Surely few qualities can be more important?

The five articles in this edition address a diverse range of subject matter, but each in its own way provides a comment on the continuing relevance or otherwise of traditional urban forms to life in contemporary cities and city regions. Xue's article on the indoor 'public' spaces of Mass Transit Railway Stations in Hong Kong considers the design and regulation of internal 'public' spaces that are clearly differentiated from those of the historic city. On the basis of a number of case studies, Xue argues that such spaces comprise increasingly important aspects of life in large cities – though, as he acknowledges, this raises serious questions about what exactly is recognized as 'public' space.

Reporting on the Ursula Project taking place at the University of Sheffield, Pattacini argues that the demand for greater energy efficiency in response to climate change requires sustained innovation in urban design to facilitate temperature control systems in buildings. His short article suggests that urban design could be usefully informed by urban morphology in order to better understand how vernacular urban forms adapt to local climatic conditions, as large-scale archi-

tectural projects have not traditionally prioritized such issues.

Sohn, Moudon and Lee make the case for neighbourhood walkability from an economic standpoint, rather than the more common focus on community and health issues. On the basis of research that includes a statistical analysis of property prices across a range of land uses, their study suggests that increased neighbourhood density and pedestrian accessibility tend to create economic value. This research raises the important issue that if urban form itself has a value that businesses and developers are able to exploit, then urban designers should be aware of their role in creating that value.

Arterial roads are vital to the functioning of the city at a number of scales, but their potential to constitute 'liveable streets' at the human-scale has usually been viewed as secondary to their strategic importance in traffic management. The article by Tiwari and Curtis examines the design-level difficulties for creating places on major intra-settlement routes. The authors draw on research from a case study of Perth, Australia, to test how their multi-scale classification model (FUS-ion) can help address this issue. Their work is a useful contribution to the growing literature concerned with how major network infrastructure can be made more effective for users across urban scales – and particularly at the human scale.

Paterson's article provides a timely and comprehensive consideration of the UK's new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2012). This framework forms an important part of the UK coalition government's 'localism' agenda in relation to issues of urban design and planning. Paterson's work draws on a wide range of academic, professional and community-based authorities to enquire into exactly what the new NPPF needs to do in order to function as successful urban design guidance, while at the same time negotiating the self-evident difficulties in creating a centralized regulatory regime for localized planning and design governance.

Tensions between 'ancients' and 'moderns', the socially desirable and the economically viable, the aesthetic and the functional, the design scale and the strategic-planning scale, and between top-down and bottom-up systems of regulation (to name but a few) must be intrinsic to any academic and professional field concerned with entities as complex and multi-faceted as cities. Sometimes, different points of view or opposing interests must remain irreconcilable. This is

probably a good thing – urban designers (and urban societies) cannot afford to be hostage either to simplified images of the urban past or visions of futurity that do not acknowledge that in historical time the 'new' is always a dialogue with the 'old'. Even in a world characterized by near-instantaneous global capital transfer, the accelerated transit of people and the rapid opening up of virtual spaces online, the right to the social space of the city – that is, when one *needs* recourse to it – is still something to be valued. After all, none of these spaces is mutually exclusive and the emergence of one does not have to imply the annihilation of the other.

References

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