

Unloved places revisited: archaeology and urban planning

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Considered globally, the extensive published literature of the field of Urban Archaeology (I use upper-case letters deliberately) seems to fall into four main categories, regardless of period. First, there are individual town and city studies, the publications of which are usually precipitated by, and make central use of data from, excavations. The excavations in question are rarely research-led: the ownership, development and value of properties in most urban environments means that excavation that is not linked to development (or, more accurately, redevelopment) is extremely rare, so the general conclusions drawn in these publications are determined by factors outside of research frameworks. Second, there are period- and place-specific surveys of urbanism; the quantity of those written by archaeologists and foregrounding archaeological evidence falls away, not surprisingly, as one moves from the middle ages into the modern period, so that, for example, books on Viking-era towns based mainly on archaeology are relatively commonplace whereas books on early modern cities based on archaeology are not. Third, there are general overviews of urban archaeological practice, usually addressing such issues as the relative merits of different recording systems (Carver 1987, for example). Finally, there are published strategic or policy documents (Staski [ed] 1987, for example), and Urban Archaeology has probably been responsible for more of these than any other branch of the discipline; these items usually address the specific problems of doing archaeology in the urban environment, and these problems range from the benefits and non-benefits of piling to matters of preservation.

All this suggests that Urban Archaeology is a verdant, fruit-bearing, off-shoot of the larger disciplinary tree. In view of that, it is worth looking back more than twenty-five years to the assertion made by Peter Clack and Susanne Haselgrove that ‘archaeologists still have no clear idea of what they are trying to contribute to urban studies’ (Clack and Haselgrove 1981, 3). Clack and Haselgrove were writing about medieval and earlier urbanisms in particular, and from within an English research environment, but their assertion had a wider geographical and chronological catchment at the time. Separated from Clack and Haselgrove by one intellectual revolution (postmodernism), an enlarging disciplinary interest in the archaeology of the recent past (Tarlow and West [eds] 1998, for example), and a whole lot of new archaeological data, it is valid to wonder if things any different now. Yes, archaeological concerns—to save historic structures already known, and to protect/reveal layers and buildings unknown as yet—now need to be factored into urban planning in many countries, and to that extent urban archaeology has moved from the margins to the centre, but the core questions remain. Does Urban Archaeology offer the wider field of urban studies much more than historical specificity? Has it useful cross-cultural and temporally non-specific insights into the materialities and spatialities of urban living that it can share with cognate disciplines within the urban studies tent? Have archaeologists anything to offer when, for example, 1960s residential tower-blocks are being pulled down and their inhabitants re-homed, other than an insistence that the cleared ground be excavated before something new is built? Adrian Green’s recent assertion that Archaeology possesses the approaches that can ‘contribute enormously to our understanding of urbanism, not only in specific places but as part of larger processes of cultural development and interaction’ (2006, 1) has a ring of optimism but is revealingly aspirational. It begs the following: if Archaeology *can* contribute, has it?

Julian Lamb, in his recent opinion piece on ‘unloved places’ (2008), noted Archaeology’s capacity to reveal urban time-depth, but he also identified the discipline’s tacit assumption of a separation between ‘now’ and ‘then’ as the inherent weakness in the archaeological engagement with *contemporary* cityscapes and in the archaeological contribution to the planning issues germane to those cityscapes. Now, most theoretically-aware archaeologists today would reject his assertion as somewhat inaccurate with respect to the discipline in general, pointing out how postmodern reflection within Archaeology has revealed the embeddedness of the construct of ‘then’ in the construct of ‘now’. And, although not widely recognised (see Merryfield 2001, for example), so-called Historical Archaeology (which describes the archaeological study of the modern period) has been pushing archaeological praxis away from functionalist interpretations of recovered data in the direction of an usually-Marxian social activism for the contemporary world, often in urban environments (Schavelzon 1999; Leone 2005). Much of the impetus for this ‘emancipatory archaeology’, as Dean Siatta (2007) has called it (albeit in a non-urban context), has come from university-sector Archaeology, and it clearly fulfills some of the facilitating, partnership and technical roles that Gilderbloom and Mullins (2005) argue that the academy should contribute to the issue of urban sustainability. The explicitly political agenda of some of the work in Historical Archaeology in North America in particular fits well with the view that ‘each

generation... defines the urban question after its own fashion, as an articulation of social challenges, political predicaments and theoretical issues reflecting the current conjuncture of urban society' and addresses that new definition through 'new conceptual tools and new forms of political mobilization' (Scott and Moulaert 1997, 267).

Yet, Lamb is largely correct. Urban archaeologists have indeed, as he puts it, 'overlooked [the] opportunity to investigate and record those inhabited urban places that still exist within our contemporary built environments'. In Ireland, for example, the emphasis within the archaeological profession and the heritage agencies has been on the efficient retrieval of data followed by its *normative* explanation (O'Keeffe 2009). These attainable and quantifiable goals allow archaeologists in Ireland to contribute historical detail to the discussion of 'the urban', which they have done very successfully over the past three decades, but have neither encouraged them nor equipped them to intercede in wider debates on urban issues, except with respect to the physical preservation of what is canonically defined as heritage. It is worth noting in this regard that the Heritage Council of Ireland commissioned the Oxford Archaeological Unit less than a decade ago to review Urban Archaeological Practice in Ireland, and that their comprehensive report, available on-line at <http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/publications/urbanarch/execsummary.html>, does *not* recommend any of the shifts in the epistemology, methodology or chronological reach of archaeological practice that might address Lamb's point; there is, in other words, nothing radical in the report's conclusions that there is a need for "a practical definition of sustainability for the historic environment in the local context of urban archaeology, architecture and townscape" (3.4.11), a need for "future urban archaeology research frameworks ... to establish some basic tenets about the survival and future potential of archaeological deposits, and some basic questions about urbanism in general as well as about individual towns" (4.7.16), and a need for "future urban archaeology research frameworks ... to establish some basic tenets about the survival and future potential of archaeological deposits, and some basic questions about urbanism in general as well as about individual towns" (4.7.16).

But I think there is reason for optimism, even if it is a quarter-of-a century late. We must accept that archaeological interventions in urban spaces, at least in the western hemisphere, are (as pointed out already) usually developer-funded and of a rescue nature, so to explore the archaeology of urban contemporaneity is a luxury towards which no money is ever given. And we should probably accept that this has allowed archaeologists and heritage agencies to quietly wriggle free of responsibility for recording and interpreting, and for providing planning guidance with respect to, the materialities of contemporary cities and contemporary city communities. But we are beginning to see a change. English Heritage's *Change and Creation: Historic Landscape Character 1950-2000* project (<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~arch0217/changeandcreation/>), for example, is an imaginative archaeological engagement, by a national heritage agency often accused anecdotally of conservatism, with the sort of lived-in space that Lamb identifies as deserving of it. Even in Ireland, where radical archaeological thinking is not widespread, there are signs of change. One of the criticisms that I would level at the *Urban Archaeological Practice in Ireland* report mentioned above is that it leaves working class and certain other contemporary communities in Dublin (such as the immigrant African community) doubly disenfranchised: their heritages are not old enough to be subjected to the same level of archaeological engagement (and legal protection) as earlier heritages, and the capacity of individual archaeologists to train their intellects on issues of concern to those communities is blunted by the requirements of disciplinary professionalism and by a narrow institutional vision of what constitutes 'proper' Archaeology. And yet, the very same Heritage Council also generously funded *Placing Voices, Voicing Places: Spatiality, Materiality and Identity-Formation Among Dublin's Working Class and Immigrant Communities*, a project by myself and a number of colleagues on the heritages of three communities in Dublin city—the African immigrant community, the Muslim community, and the city's 'traditional' or 'indigenous' working class—of which the stated objective was to challenge fundamentally Ireland's official heritage discourse, as articulated by the Heritage Council itself. This willingness of a statutory heritage agency to fund a project that openly aims to subvert its own understanding of urban heritage is laudable indeed. The results of *Placing Voices, Voicing Places* will be published in time, and a summary will be submitted to *Urban Morphology*, but suffice it to say here that the project's cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral membership, and its insistence on listening to local community voices articulate their sense of their own materiality, suggests how a conceptual road-map for an archaeology of Lamb's 'unloved places' and of other contemporary urban places will eventually be developed.

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