

UNDERSTANDING THE URBAN HERITAGE – MORPHOGENESIS OF THE TRADITIONAL URBAN BLOCKS

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KÖRNER ZSUZSA A TÖRTÉNETI
VÁROSSZÖVET MEGÚJULÁSA 1870
ÉS 1940 KÖZÖTT

Zsuzsa Körner **Renewal of the Historic Urban Fabric between 1870 and 1940**
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The monograph, for which the title in English is *Renewal of the historic urban fabric between 1870 and 1940*, forms through its complex approach the next significant stage of Zsuzsa Körner's research and publication oeuvre. Issued in 2015, it provides a logic and thematic continuation of her previous volumes, such as *The history of the town planning regulations in Hungary* (2004) with co-author Márta Nagy, *Estate-like housing construction in Hungary between 1850 – 1945* (2004), *International and domestic history of the estate-like housing construction from 1945 to the present* (2006)-co-author Márta Nagy and *Urban construction forms, types of tenant houses and apartments* (2010). The current book was supervised by Tamás Meggyesi, the establisher of the discipline of urban morphology in Hungary. According to the summary on the book jacket flap "The book uncovers the role of local building traditions and of the housing reform movement at the end of the 19th century in the creation of healthy housing conditions, and analyses the building codes that generate changes", and does so till the period just before the outbreak of World War II. In this manner, the author establishes a single unit, encompassing the first intense period of transformation of the historical urban fabric, during which the renewal processes were manifested both on the level of urban block-sized undertakings and of site-level constructions. The book deals with local building traditions and introduces the importance of the housing reform movements in field of urban planning and urban design at the end of the 19th century, i.e. the movement aimed to create healthy housing conditions, to control speculative housing construction and to establish the regulations and requirements of minimum space necessary for comfortable living.

However, the monograph of Zsuzsa Körner is a still more ambitious work, since it not only reveals and explains the morphogenesis of the urban blocks logically, illustrated

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with international cases, visually via maps and other illustrations, but at the same time draws specific conclusions which increase the scientific importance of the work. The author states that the conclusions are sometimes surprising, but logical explanation leaves no doubts about the correct nature of the findings. "A significant number of early framed constructions have no connection with the previously created tenement building forms from the 17th and 18th century: their appearance is partly related with the building code requirements in the last quarter of the century. Although at first sight it seems astounding to draw parallels between the two cases, nonetheless the starting point of their bond, the special structure-forming ability of the small blocks justifies it." (p. 38).

The sections 'Glossary' and 'Timeline' add further value to Körner's work. The Timeline summarizes the types of the blocks and the period of their formation, as well as the phases of transformation. The importance of the Glossary should be highlighted, since the academic literature (starting from Rossi, Conzen, Caniggia and others) applies specific (sometimes unique) definitions about urban forms, therefore making it necessary to establish and use definitions adapted to the actual work. The Timeline gives the work a more 'traceable' and transparent framework, because reading such material requires careful attention. The author devotes consideration to the time periods and decades thematically, but shifts freely between territories (cities and countries), lists examples of more than a dozen (14) countries in the analyses, comparing not just the urban fabric and urban block transformations of the European cities, but also takes cases from cities of other continents. As a result, in addition to New York examples are also presented of more than 40 cities overall.

Even in the title, the author points out that the key element of the town structure is the urban fabric, and the study of urban

¹ ISUF Glossary. Conzen M.R.G.: Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis. Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers), 27. London, George Philip 1960. 172 p.

² We have to mention Antal Palóczy, since he was one of the leading urban planners in Austria-Hungary, responsible for the urban regulation plan of Bratislava, among others (Freedom Square in Budapest, Oradea, Sopron, Arad, Nyíregyháza etc.).

fabric transformations presents a very exciting period of urban planning and constructions, their physical changes, underlying problems and aims. It draws attention to how new requirements and demands, speculations, demographic explosion, and the existence or lack of regulations affected to the urban fabric's development. Plot analysis provides an idea about the evolution of the plot and its shape, and is correlated with the streets (simple tissue – after Caniggia) analysed according to the plot and street form relations and building lines. Since each street has its unique character and structure, the study of the streets has a multiplied effect and results not only in the identification of the urban tissue, but in the townscape analyses as well. According to the determination by Conzen, "The town plan may be divided into three constituent parts or elements: streets, and their arrangement into a street system; plots and their aggregation in street blocks; and buildings within those plots. Each combination of these plan elements derives a uniqueness from the characteristics of site and the established morphological frame."¹ According to Körner's definition, the plot-block is a group of plots, which is bounded on all sides by roads (p. 173). The identified and outlined urban tissues refer to the 'urban block', but the urban block in some cases may not only consist of a single block/area surrounded by streets, but a territory that consists of some block elements (establishing a continuous special existence) and its elements (buildings, streets, plots and their relationships and systems). Within a block, the relationship between the plots and the road is itself studied, and also how the individual homogeneous areas relate to the neighbouring areas.

The author presents explanations, site analyses and factual findings based on a rich selection of 335 (mostly unpublished) planning materials including maps, aerial photos, perspective views, urban plans, floor plans, façade sketches, photos about the interior of the blocks, together with supporting materials (tables made by the author and other sources incorporated with archive documents), legal documents, magazine covers, or even conference posters. In addition to the established facts, Körner gives a place to the different opinions and lessons learned during the debates in the time of the construction, as well. The structure of the book is accurate and rigorous, the endnotes are placed at the end the three chapters (88+76+51, 215 endnotes), the number items in the Selected

Literature is high, which is complemented by internet bibliographical sources.

The author managed to process and explain the period of the urban fabric's renewal (or more accurately, its evolution, transformation or metamorphosis) between 1870 and 1940 not only via the Timeline and evolution of urban block forms, but using the plan materials to demonstrate the variations of blocks with vacant patios divided into plots. The Western-European (in many cases complemented by the Northern-European types) and the Hungarian urban block types are discussed in particular detail: since the typology is particularly important, the book serves as an indispensable resource for those dealing with urban fabric typology and addressing the specific aspects of urban morphology. The study of the historical urban fabric cannot be undertaken without the knowledge about formation and typology of the blocks, without mastering, if only partially, the urban planning trends, literature and planning principles of the very time, which had strong impact on the urban planning and urban design of the era.

In the second chapter of the book, Körner discusses the subdivisions of the regulation plans and the leading urban planning principles in Germany and the Nordic countries. The influential urban planning book by the Viennese planner Camillo Sitte, *City Building according to Artistic Principles* (1889) established a new, artistic view of planning (design). The 'Sittesque school' was followed by German urban planners and also their colleagues from the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland); the Hungarian representatives were Antal Palóczy² and László Varga. Though the author notes the influence of modernisation of the urban block metamorphoses, she keeps a focus on the 'traditional' urban blocks and their reasonable changes, without dealing with the 'deconstruction of the block', that might undermine the linear and well-layered structure of the book.

The importance of the book is not just in the accurate typology, the urban tissue/urban block development timeline, the logical and well structured 'story-line', or even the interesting and sometimes astounding scholarly conclusions, but in the message of the author, which is infused the text and the endeavour to make something permanent: "We cannot strive to bring back methods and traditions of the past but we have to preserve the heritage of humanized city structures they presented (...)" (p. 183).

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