Book Reviews
The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning and Culture

Edited by Greg Young and Deborah Stevenson
Ashgate Publishing. 2013
ISBN 9781409422242

The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning and Culture gathers in one volume an erudite collection of perspectives on both contemporary and historical theories of planning and culture, and the ways that these reflect and inform critical issues for urban planning today. It is an ambitious task that draws on the work of a diverse range of theories articulated by Australian and international academics from disciplines including urban planning, social policy, environment studies, sustainability, geography, architecture, and cultural studies.

The volume is concerned with six principal themes – 1) cultural diversity, 2) local place and global flows, 3) the cultural and creative industries, 4) public space and citizenship, 5) cultural planning and sustainability perspectives, and 6) social and cultural theories and concepts of culture, history and heritage.’ (Young & Stevenson 2013: 12). The text is organised in six distinct parts; each with a summarising preface and consolidated with a concluding case study that provides an illustration of its premise in practice. However, the overarching themes defy this arrangement, tending to a level of cross-referencing that, at times, disturbs the flow of argument.

The editors present a perspective of the relationship between culture and planning that broadens the current debate, much of which tends to conflate heritage with culture. The concept of culture explored here draws on a more philosophical, sociological perspective and views culture in terms that range from the high arts to local crafts, embracing concepts such as the slow city movement and the conscious reinvigoration of disused industrial areas to attract artists and artisans, in response to changing and declining economic climates. In part three – ‘Culture and its Dimensions’ – writers discuss the ways that culture and citizenship intersect to revive tradition and foster social inclusion. These propositions are illustrated by the case study that describes the ways that Kanazawa and Yokahama in Japan have embraced, in different ways, elements of intangible culture in the form of traditional crafts and industries to re-invigorate, not only a declining economy, but social policy and traditional neighbourhoods. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is that it draws together understandings of cultural heritage from a variety of definitions and perspectives, thus articulating a conception of cultural heritage in which the intangible and tangible are inextricably bound.

The strength of this collection is in those essays that contribute to a polemic about the nature of contemporary urban planning and how this may best address contemporary issues of sustainability, social policy, community participation and the concept of place. In these considerations, there is a subtle shift in tone that addresses the pragmatic reader as well as
the student. Essays in part four – ‘Planning Practices’ – are concerned with the critical and complex issues that face contemporary urban planning policy and decision-making. It is in this part that the most interesting, relevant and practical approaches to planning are discussed in the context of place identity, development, sustainability, creativity and cultural resilience. For both practitioners and students, these essays are useful in articulating the need to establish planning regimes that are able to engage realistically with community and public interests so that they become embedded in urban planning principles. In ‘Planning and Place Identity’, Dovey analyses ‘urban character’ and explains in an Australian context, the problems associated with defining it, and then enshrining its protection in planning codes and practice. This paper is an excellent explanation of how planning statutes have, on the one hand, responded to community concerns but how, on the other, practice and the built environment have been compromised by the very elements of ‘urban character’ they seek to protect.

Drawing the premises of this companion together, the papers in part six – ‘Cultural and Planning Dynamics’ explore the ways that understandings of culture and principles of planning interact with each other. Bianchini’s chapter “Cultural Planning” and its Interpretations’, outlines and considers the ‘cultural planning’ approach that originated in the US in the late 1970s-1980s. In one of the few essays that explicitly addresses cultural heritage, Hillier’s case study ‘Global Futures: New Opportunities for Creative Cultural Tourism’ is a critique of traditional and enshrined conceptions of heritage such as the Authorized Heritage Discourse utilised in Britain. Using an historic English amusement park as an example, she illustrates why such approaches limit the consideration of heritage to out-dated and conservative heritage values. Similarly, Young - ‘Stealing the Fire of Life: A Cultural Paradigm for Planning and Governance’, proposes a ‘Culturized Model for Planning and Governance’ where the intent is to plan with culture rather than for it. (op.cit.: 360).

The great strength of this companion is the broad range of theory and perspectives it presents to explore the necessary interrelationship between culture, heritage (intangible and tangible), and planning in the context of contemporary and global planning.

References

Young, G., 2013, ‘Introduction: Culture and planning in a grain of sand’, in G. Young & D. Stevenson (Eds), The Ashgate research companion to planning and culture, Ashgate, Surrey and Burlington.

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Digital Archetypes: Adaptations of Early Temple Architecture in South and Southeast Asia

Sambit Datta and David Beynon
Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014
ISBN: 9781409470649

Digital Archetypes describes itself as forming part of the ‘Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities’ series that explores the transformative role digital technology is playing in research of the Arts and Humanities.

This particular volume examines the research conducted by Sambit Datta and David Beynon, providing an interesting example of how they used digital technology to contribute to their research. The focus of Datta and Beynon’s research is Brahmanic/Hindu temple architecture, dating from between 400 to 900 CE. Specifically, they explore the linkages between the
archetypal temple form (cella or sanctum) described in architectural canons with the physical adaptations across South and Southeast Asia. By examining these adaptations the research attempts to form a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between different civilisations of the region during this time period.

The book is well-structured allowing readers to travel with the authors through their research process outlining the scope of the project, background on previous research, methodology, results and a clear conclusion.

Remaining evidence of temple architecture both in architectural canons and the temples themselves is largely fragmentary. Datta and Beynon have responded to the difficulties this presents by using the fragments that are available in an innovative way – in particular, as inputs to generate digital models of possible representations of the temples. Firstly they create a model based on the descriptions found in architectural canons. A second model is generated based on field measurements and photogrammetry. The combination of these two images is then used to generate a third three-dimensional model. A physical scaled prototype of the temple can then be generated using 3D rapid prototyping technologies.

Digital modelling allows for comparisons between the temples, specifically their compositional and proportional aspects, to be easily made. For example, Datta and Beynon compared the temples in relation to their plan, site arrangement, bases and walls, superstructure, materials and construction techniques. This comparative research contributes to a greater understanding of the temples.

Datta and Beynon stress that digital technology is not a replacement for traditional research methods. Instead it is an additional tool that can be used in conjunction with traditional research methods to assist in creating a more comprehensive understanding of significance. I think that Datta and Beynon successfully reflect this argument in the following analogy:

“Just as close-ups or slow motion in film permit seeing reality in a deeper way, digital models provide such a mode in the case of understanding architecture. Skeletal models of geometry, dissections and sectional renders allow the reader/viewer to immerse themselves in the otherwise hidden and unavailable aspects of architecture, not experienced through direct perception of the original” (p. 26).

Throughout the book both English and Sanskrit terms for architectural components are used. Unfortunately there is a lack of consistency in this approach. In some cases the English definition is given in parenthesis in-text, sometimes the Sanskrit is given in parenthesis, or no definition is provided in-text and the reader has to consult the definitions of Sanskrit terms in the glossary. This inconsistency made it challenging to read and understand architectural details.

Graphics of the digital models generated are spread through the book and are useful accompaniments to the text. The summarisation of the research results in a table provided a clear visual representation to the reader of the similarities and differences between each of the temples. This was especially helpful as a number of temples from India, Java, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and Pakistan were examined. The table helped to consolidate the information neatly and in an easy to read format.

Overall, the book provides an interesting look into how developments in digital technologies are changing the nature of research in the Arts and Humanities. The study was well researched and supported. I feel that it would be of most benefit to those who specialise in architectural heritage, however, the research methodology and discussion on the use of digital technologies is applicable to all in the heritage field. It is exciting to think how technological developments will continue to transform research and what discoveries will be uncovered in heritage into the future.

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