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The Origin and Evolution of Urban Form in
Wanganui East, Gonville and Castlecliff.

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Geography
at Massey University.

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PLATE 1: WANGANUI EAST.



PLATE 2: GONVILLE.



PLATE 3: CASTLECLIFF.



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INTRODUCTION.

Scope.

The decision to study the urban form of Wanganui East, Gonville and Castlecliff (Plates 1,2 and 3) was made in 1968 after discussions with Mr. Ross, the then Town Planner for the City of Wanganui. The topic was chosen for two reasons. It was felt that the results could provide an insight into the evolution and nature of the suburbs concerned, which would be of use to the City Planners. In addition it allowed for study in depth of concepts which appeared to be of considerable relevance not only to the geographer, but to the community as a whole.

The three suburbs were selected because they alone within the present Borough of Wanganui had once existed as separate towns (see AppendixA), and it was thought that because of this they might exhibit distinctive characteristics in their physical form. This hypothesis appeared to be supported by a preliminary investigation of the material available. Concomitant with this assumption and resultant hypothesis was the belief that it was in any case important to examine and identify the elements of form in urban areas. It was felt that these, if investigated properly, could be helpful in correcting some of the problems inherent in the suburbs, and in New Zealand towns in general.

The Conceptual Framework.

The following conceptual framework has been

developed for this study. It is largely original and is based upon research results, but it has at the same time a clearly established affinity with the type of morphological study developed by geographers such as Dickinson.¹

Urban areas may be considered as ecological units in which there is by definition a close relationship between the various elements. These urban units or suburbs vary in the size and complexity of their elements, and also in the subtlety of the inter-relationships of these elements. The three suburbs under examination in this study are in these respects relatively small and simple. The urban unit has many characteristics, many elements. These for the sake of simplification, and at the risk of oversimplification, may be organised into three fields; physical, social, and economic.

This study is concerned primarily with an examination of the physical characteristics of the three suburban areas. More specifically its attention is directed towards an examination of their morphological structure. Five elements have accordingly been selected for investigation.

- (i) The pattern of the original subdivision of land.
- (ii) Development of the street system.
- (iii) Growth of the population.
- (iv) The spatial evolution of buildings.
- (v) The essential characteristics of the basic unit of the suburbs, the house.

The above are not considered to be the sum total of all the elements, but it is felt that they are among the most

important underlying the form of the suburbs. Other elements such as natural features, open space, transport, commercial and industrial uses are also referred to.

The study takes the following form:

(i) An investigation of the historical evolution of the elements which have given rise to the urban landscape.

(ii) An examination of this landscape, based upon a synthesis of the elements.

The Morphological Study: A General Statement.

There are a number of ways in which the city may be considered. One of the most important of these conceptual approaches sees 'function' and 'form' as the two essential factors in the delineation of urban areas. The problem of the geographer asserts Dickinson, "is to determine not only the distinctive functions of urban settlement, but also how its elements are arranged in relation to each other, and to the streets and places,"² or in other words the nature of its morphological structure.

The weight of literature in the field of urban geography indicates that there have been many more functional than morphological studies. This imbalance and neglect has been recognised by Collins who has stated:

"very little more is known about the present day composition, function, and morphology of towns, than is known about the ancient cities. Little progress has been made in establishing definitive techniques, let alone laws which stand the test of universal application. Furthermore most present day studies are descriptive rather than interpretive, and fail to explain the dynamics of human evolution."³

If this last criticism is true of this thesis, it is very possibly because the recency of the field (claimed by Collins himself) has not permitted the development of a satisfactory descriptive methodology, upon which to base more sophisticated interpretive work. This being so further descriptive work of this kind is highly desirable, and indeed is a prerequisite for such interpretive study.

One further viewpoint expressed by Collins is worthy of consideration. It is only when the geographer can come to grips with the urban microcosm that he can hope to arrive at any significant conclusions regarding the nature of towns. Much of the essence of the form of large cities can be explained by examining small urban areas. Extensive studies of large areas in the past have often invited superficiality. Thus investigation of three small areas such as Wanganui East, Gonville, and Castlecliff, provides an opportunity for much needed study in depth.

An Approach to the Morphological Study.

The methodological framework of this study is based on the type of morphological study postulated by Dickinson, who states that the geographical study of urban settlement is concerned with four main problems.⁴

(i) The physical and cultural conditions involved in the origin of settlements.

(ii) The reaction of the nucleus in its functional and morphological development to historical events.

(iii) The life and organization of the settlement viewed areally, both as a whole, and with respect to

differentiations within it.

(iv) The interrelationships between the settlement and its surrounding territory.

The investigation of the first three of these problems, is the central concern of this thesis. As it is morphological in nature, the study is logically concerned more with the physical than the specifically cultural conditions of urban areas. It should not be forgotten however that they are a direct expression of the character and personality of the society which built them. As such they will at points in the thesis suggest wider implications of a social and economic nature.

The reaction of the nucleus to historical events, and the organization of settlement viewed areally, are features fundamental to an understanding of the present form of urban areas. The maps included in this study depicting the changing spatial distributions and general growth of buildings through time, are thus of vital importance.

The study of settlements both as a whole, and with respect to differentiations within them, needs elucidation. This study is directed towards the examination of three suburbs, which may be regarded as sub-systems, and hence integral parts of one larger system. Although these sub-systems are treated individually, it is important to remember that they are segments of a larger unit.

There remains one further issue which should not be forgotten. In deciding to divide these urban areas

into two aspects, functional and morphological, it is realised that they are intimately interrelated. They are part of an ecological unit, which is in the philosophical sense one.

The Problem of the New Zealand City.

Studies of this type are often motivated by the presence of problems which because of their magnitude require urgent solutions. The three suburbs included in this study however, in line with most New Zealand cities, cannot be said to be in a serious condition. On the other hand they appear to contain a number of unfavourable attributes, which if not corrected soon may provide the basis for future problems of the kind (if not the magnitude) facing many of the cities of the world.

Fox states that to function well a city must deal with change. "The population explosion, the growth of industry, the development of the private motor car," and other associated factors (which include the burgeoning of the quarter acre section, the chain wide street, and the bungalow), have initiated rapid change, and have "weakened the design and logic of cities."⁵ Suburban sprawl, engendered by growing affluence, and the development of dispersed units, has acquired as associated features, the breakdown of community and neighbourhood life. This has raised the question of whether the present pattern of suburban form, based often on different principles for a different age is suitable for today and for the future. Examination of urban form, and the processes which have given rise to it, may provide important

clues for the future. Although New Zealand towns are young, the past is clearly and indelibly stamped on them. They are as subject to obsolescence as any cities elsewhere in the world, indeed local body litigation and dwindling city centres are already features of New Zealand life.

Geography and Planning.

There is an obvious although not necessarily a clearly defined relationship between geography and the field of planning, and more specifically in terms of this thesis between geography and town planning. The study of the morphology of an urban area illustrates this relationship, for it draws on material from both fields of knowledge. Zetter states that the Geographer and the Town Planner are both concerned with man's physical environment⁶ a satisfactory summation, providing that he does not mean primarily concerned. His statement does in any case highlight one area in which the two disciplines meet and overlap. The morphological study concerned as it is with the physical structure of urban areas, is one of the ways the Geographer chooses to appraise the surface of the earth, as the habitat of man. The Town Planner on the other hand studies the physical form of an urban area as one of the important (perhaps the most important) indices by which he can plan both for the present and for the future. They share literally a common 'area' of interest, although their conceptual viewpoints and the forces which motivate them are different.

Footnotes.

1. Dickinson, 1959, 20-24.
2. _____, 1959, 20.
3. Collins, 1965, 215.
4. Dickinson, 1959, 12.
5. Fox, 1964, 1.
6. Zetter, 1966, 270.