

PROJECT PARCEL: METHODS OF MORPHOLOGY IN PLACES WITH STRONG PROPERTY RIGHTS

Michael Piper, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Director of Master of Urban Design Program, University of Toronto, Canada.

ABSTRACT

In the North American cities, property owners are not generally required to build their lot according to prescribed urban design schemes or zoning guidelines. Such parcels are often referred to as holdouts, signifying their nuisance to a desired scheme. Canadian architect and urban designer George Baird wrote three essays that reframe the idea of the parcel (see Baird 1978, 1988, 2013). Rather than view property as an institution whose contingencies undermine an ideal urban form, he instead argues that the differentiated ownership of private property bears its own unique ideal. He goes on to propose a method of morphological analysis that is able to operate in the variegated and heterogeneous conditions that result from strong property rights in North American cities. This paper reviews the propositions in these three essays by Baird and further articulates their implications for morphological analysis. Keywords: urban morphology, typology, property rights, agency, George Baird.

INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND

In the North American cities, property owners are not generally required to build their lot according to prescribed urban design schemes or zoning guidelines. Consider, for example, a big box store proprietor in Atlanta who refuses to comply with a form-based area plan that calls for mixed-use and street frontage because he wanted to retain the visibility of his parking lot (see Dunham-Jones, 2015). Such parcels are often referred to as holdouts, signifying their nuisance to a desired scheme.

Canadian architect and urban designer George Baird has written several essays that reframe the idea of the parcel. Rather than view property as an institution whose contingencies undermine an ideal urban form, he instead argues that it must be understood as a fundamental element for shaping it, especially in cities with strong property right such as in North America. Baird takes the argument further, suggesting that land-ownership has a positive potential to encourage a more democratic form of city building. Notwithstanding the fact that land-ownership has historically been reserved for wealthier classes, nor its inherent speculative abuse typical in many market economies, his essays about property broaden urban design discourse which tends hold a critical and negative view of property.

In a series of three essays that address property: "Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto," 1978, "Studies on Urban Morphology in North America," 1988, and "Thoughts on "Agency, "Utopia," and Property," 2013, (republished in Baird, 2015) George Baird argues, among other things, for the importance of parcel patterning in understanding urban form in market-based cities in North America. This paper is a summary of a book chapter that I recently wrote about these three essays (Piper, 2020). Building on a more polemical and broad discussion about private property, this essay focuses explicitly on the how methods of morphological analysis might address issues of contingency and uncertainty when making urban design proposals in places with strong property rights. The goal is to consider practical use for urban morphology, as a tool for nuancing urban design schemes that might otherwise assume an absolute or singular end state.

POLITICS OF THE PARCEL

In his 2013 essay, "Thoughts on "Agency", "Utopia" and Property", Baird critiqued architectural theories that associate progressive social ideals with a criticism of private property. On one hand his essay is pragmatic, coming to terms with the intractability of private landownership, the political economies that uphold its rights and the unlikely event of a deep institutional change. On the other, he proposes that there are positive potentials to landownership, that it encourages bottom-up participation for city building. He draws some of these ideas from Hannah Arendt.

Concerned with the kinds of top down control associated with totalitarian governance, Arendt suggests the idea of agency, or the capacity of individuals to participate in the shaping of their environments. Baird drew a parallel between this idea of agency as a kind of democratic politics, to ideas of city building that were similarly open to citizen participation (Baird, 2003). Baird considered a particular fine-grained pattern of parcelization, to be a medium through which the political abstraction of agency manifests in the production of physical space. In certain contexts, individual land ownership, at roughly the scale of a home, produces a heterogeneous aggregate of individual self-representation. As property owners build what they want on their own piece of land they build a city that has a particular scale and quality that collectively evidences their individual actions. In this essay, Baird provides two examples of such a scale and quality. One being the favela-like housing of arrival cities, such as Mumbai, Rio, Paris, Chongqing and Los Angeles. The other less politically charged example is the built form of Tokyo where the very small size of parcels contributes to the production of a small scale and variegated urban form that Baird seems to admire (Baird, 2015).

URBAN MORPHOLOGY AND THE PARCEL

Influenced by a transatlantic exchange that critiqued the absolute qualities of modern-era city planning, George Baird's 1988 essay, "Studies on Urban Morphology in North America," considers the contradictions of such discourse when considered in the context of cities with strong property rights. In postwar Europe, urban morphology developed as a critique of the formal attributes of modernist urbanism. Initially developed in academia, morphological methods were introduced into European public planning to better understand existing built form with the presumption that new design proposals might more harmoniously participate with their contexts. When these methods made their way to North America, as Baird describes, they had evolved their own paradigmatic stature. Having had its old downtown fabric replaced by mostly parking lots and highways, urban designers in the United States adopted the formal conceits from their European counterparts without however adapting their analytical methods for studying context. "Contextualism," as a theoretical platform, was conflated with historicism.

Baird looked to other sources for a different reading of formal exploration in North America urbanism. He saw Colin Rowe's *Collage City* (Rowe, 1978), though closely associated with the contextualist movement, to suggest a nuanced way of thinking about urban form that suggested the co-presence of modern architecture's object based formations along with more traditional perimeter block formal arrangements. A favorite of Baird, it would seem, is Mario Gandelsonas's projected analytical drawing of downtown Boston (Baird, 1987). Here, the city's carbunched older fabric is represented seamlessly with a mechanistic urban form of the city's newer grid. Like Rowe, differences or heterogeneity is not considered to be a detriment but rather an attribute. For Baird though, each of these analytical tools fail to address the procedural errors of modernist urbanism. That is, they still portray the city, particularly the North American city, as a singular object to be

manipulated rather than the reality of its aggregative composition. As he states, “Contextualist urban design theory, when applied, has the tendency to treat urban texture somewhat like plasticine or cheese, to be carved into shapes suitable for the definition of positive space” (Baird, 2015). As an alternative, he proposes that urban design schemes should not just shape urban space in a singular manner, but should develop ideals of built form that can be realized in various states. So, for example, it should be able to positively address the possibility of non-compliance of private land-owners to design guidelines that are passed to shape urban space.

TORONTO'S PARCELS AND TYPOLOGY

In his 1978 essay titled “Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto,” Baird introduces and describes a morphological analysis of that he conducted of Toronto’s North Jarvis neighborhood with a group of students from the University of Toronto. The group used a particular strand of typological and morphological analysis. This method, though familiar to a relatively small group of urban planners, is often overlooked by architects.

In this essay, Baird recounts that typology and morphology were often used in North America with the assumption that they would help reshape cities to be more like their European counterparts (Goode, 1992). With this intention, architects did not tend to use typology to analyze existing city space, but rather, they used it as an idealized catalogue of traditional European built form from which designers might extract references for better ways to build cities.

Baird was less interested in reproducing the European context than in appropriating the analytical tools that had been developed to study it. Within the various strands of European typology and morphology, the Toronto study has most in common with those developed in France. Bernard Huet, Jean Castex, and Christian Devillier argued that typological methods should be used as a comparative tool to analyze heterogeneous conditions, rather than as a means to establish continuous self-similarity (Castex, & Panerai, 1982). Of note is a study that Devillier and Huet (1981) made for Le Creusot, a manufacturing town built up during the industrial revolution. As a relatively new city in Europe, it lacked the kind of dense compact fabric that typology had previously been used to study. In its place was a mix of residential building types built up over diverse periods and constituting a diverse collection of urban fabrics. Their typological analysis of these different buildings is laid out in systematic fashion; each building type occupies a page with a consistent layout, allowing one to compare their specific attributes. Along with architectural analysis, this study also tracks the position of each building type on its given parcel by situating it on a cadastral map of its immediate context.

In the late 1970s Baird adapted such methods to study the North Jarvis neighborhood of Toronto. At the time, North Jarvis was a “heterogeneous – not to say jumbled – arrangement of existing buildings”. Following its initial regimented parcelization in the mid 1800s, land there would be variably subdivided to produce a range of lot sizes and accompanying diversity of building types. Baird notes that by the 1970s no single building type dominated the scene. Instead, the district’s urban form was composed of relatively equal number of buildings from successive preceding time periods. The net effect was a heterogeneous and non-hierarchical urban fabric. Recognizing the unlikely, if not undesirable, reconstitution of the entire district into an idealized, singularly figured urban form, Baird implies that the future form of the site would inevitably bear the quality of its extant diversity. Any plan for its future character must come to terms with, if not leverage, the embedded heterogeneity of the existing buildings there, and the incremental nature of their eventual redevelopment.

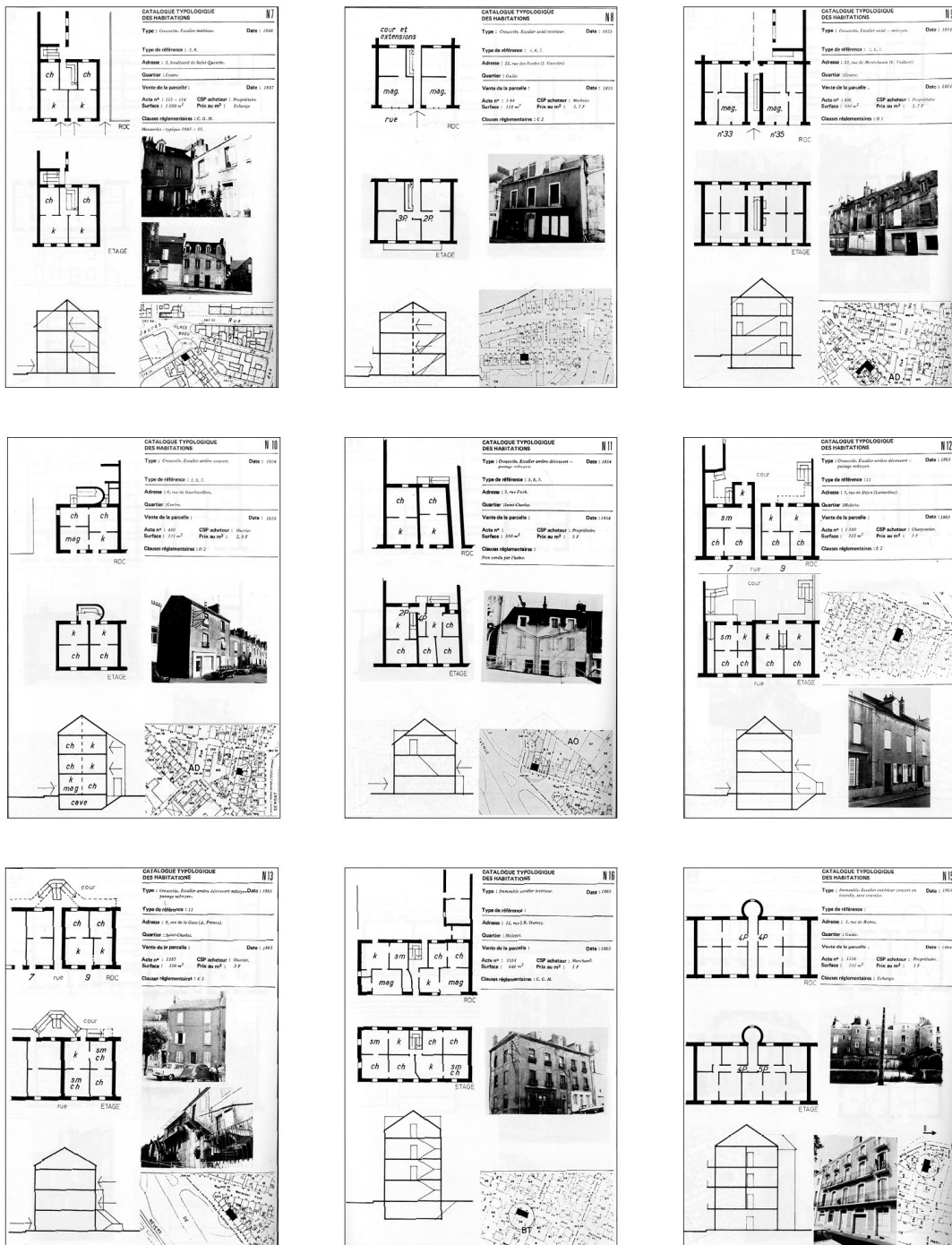


Figure 1. Christian Develier and Bernard Huet, Typology, Le Creusot, 1981

The team identified a series of key building types representative of successive historical paradigms; including detached mansions, row house, the Pulman house, low rise apartments and high-rise tower in the park types. Though formally distinct, he argues that the majority of these buildings retain a similar disposition toward the streets that they front primarily due to the dimension and shape of the parcels that they were built on. Even some of the more expediently built, economically

motivated, and dimensionally incongruous types still respect the existing morphology of the site. This condition progressed from the early 1900s to the 1950s. It wasn't until the introduction of set-back modernist slab towers that Baird argued the districts morphological character began to degrade.

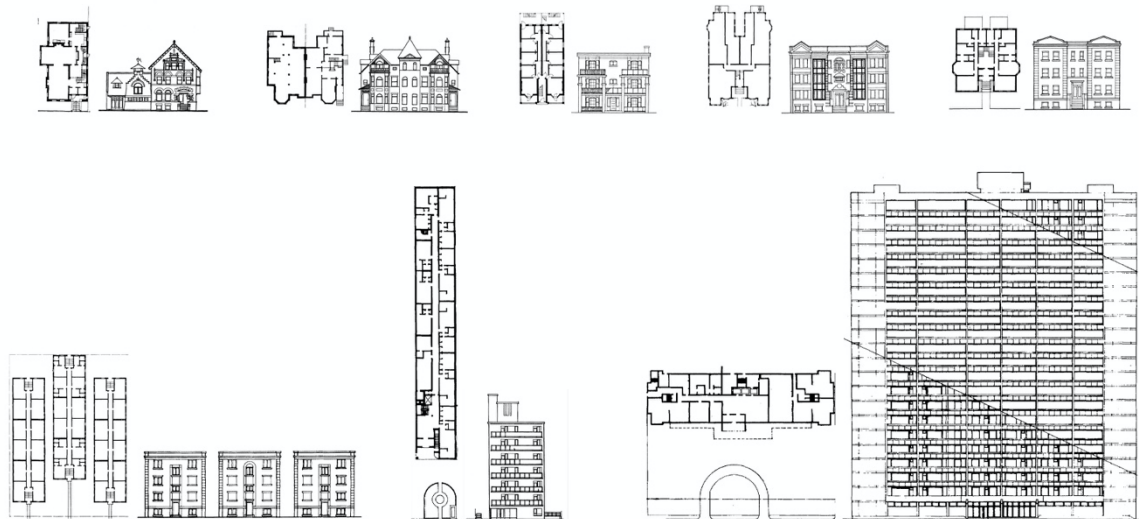


Figure 2. George Baird, *Typology, Toronto*, 1978

CONCLUSIONS

Baird's method of morphology and typology are perhaps appropriate for Toronto's downtown. However, by limiting the range of acceptable building types to those with tight street frontage and relatively consistent scale, Baird seemingly hamstrings his method to contexts where street infrastructure and parcel size are in line with those produced during the late 1800s and early 1900s in North America. Indeed, when he does take account of locations beyond the city center, he manages to find and uphold locations that mirror the downtown condition. However, such places account for only a small portion of the expansive space of today's megalopolitan regions. In the urban periphery, not only do building types vary, but so too do the parcels they occupy, and by no small amount. What's more, arterials in the suburbs are designed for fast moving traffic and may not be the ideal public realm for buildings to front. Baird's method of comparative typology would seem to be a useful tool to address such heterogeneous conditions, however, to employ such a method, one would have to suspend the a-priori filter he brings to the downtown Toronto study. Consistent street frontage among all parcels may not be the right evaluative criteria. Indeed, it's not yet clear how to judge the differentiated space of the urban periphery and what may constitute a public realm there. Placing Baird's work relative to other designers and planners studying suburban morphology in North America, may suggest a possible direction. Due to its association with private property and speculation, the parcel has a negative reputation among progressive design theorists. Notwithstanding the abuse of land as property in market economies, George

Baird, explores a parallel social and aesthetic potential of the parcel through a series of essays spanning thirty years. Theoretically he reframes urban property, not just as a basis for individualistic land development, but also as a media for agency and the expression of diversity within heterogeneous cultures. By developing methods of morphology and typology that focus on urban property, he provides alternatives to certain disciplinary norms. The parcel – as both a basis for morphology, and a codifiable entity – provides a means to negotiate policy-based approaches and those focused on built form. In North America, Baird’s writing urges designers to take seriously the loose heterogeneous built form of cities here, rather than indiscriminately adopt neo-traditional urban form as is often the case. Importantly though, this kind of thinking is not an empirical acceptance of heterogeneity in market economies as an inevitable condition. Rather, Baird suggest the idea of the parcel as a means to codify the parameters within which individual land owners may diversely build out their own lot. The parcel, as a legal and morphological entity, provides a means for architects to engage in the social, economic, and political dimensions of urbanization while still operating within the form-based focus of the discipline.

REFERENCES

- Baird, G. (2015). *Studies on Urban Morphology in North America*. In G. Baird (Ed.), *Writings on Architecture and the City*. London: Artifice books on architecture.
- Baird, G. (2015). *Theory: Vacant Lots in Toronto*. In G. Baird (Ed.), *Writings on Architecture and the City*. London: Artifice books on architecture.
- Baird, G. (2015). *Thoughts on “Agency,” “Utopia,” and Property*. In G. Baird (Ed.), *Writings on Architecture and the City*. London: Artifice books on architecture.
- Baird, G. (1987). *Urban Americana: A Commentary on the Work of Gandelsonas*, *Assemblage* 3, July, 60-62.
- Castex, J., & Panerai, P. (1982), *Prospects for Typomorphology*. *Lotus International* 36, 91-100.
- Devillers, C., & Huet, B. (1981). *Le Creusot: Naissance et développement d'une ville industrielle, 1782-1914*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon.
- Goode, T (1992). *Typological Theory in the United States: The Consumption of Architectural Authenticity*. *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 46, 2-13.
- Piper, M. (2020). *Project Parcel: An Agency for Design in the Context of Urban Property*. In R. Damiani (Ed.), *The Architect and The Public: On George Baird’s Contribution to Architecture*. *Qoudlibet Habitat*, 245-258.
- Rowe, C., & Koetter, F. (1983). *Collage City*. MIT Press.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Michael Piper, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Director of Master of Urban Design Program, University of Toronto, Canada. michael.piper@daniels.utoronto.ca