

The Anatomy of the Street

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West Wycombe (*Town & Countryside* 1932, Plate 6)

2016 Thomas Sharp Lecture

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1. *Like his native landscape*

Almost eighty years ago a controversial young man was appointed lecturer in town planning here in the School of Architecture of what was then King's College, University of Durham. He had been working as Regional Planning Assistant to the North East Durham Joint Planning Committee - 'a miserable, uninspiring job in a depressed, depressing area'¹ - but was also the author of two widely-noticed books, *Town and Countryside* (1932) and *English Panorama* (1936). It was from his Newcastle-upon-Tyne lecture materials that he conceived and wrote the well-known Pelican paperback *Town Planning* (1940) which sold a quarter of a million copies over the decade.



Though he was to leave this place acriminously - more of that later - it was here that his widow Rachel chose to bequeath his papers. Just over ten years ago they were archived in the Special Collections of the Robinson Library through a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the direction of John Pendlebury. Rachel Sharp also endowed an annual student prize together with funding for this biennial memorial

¹ Stansfield 1981 153

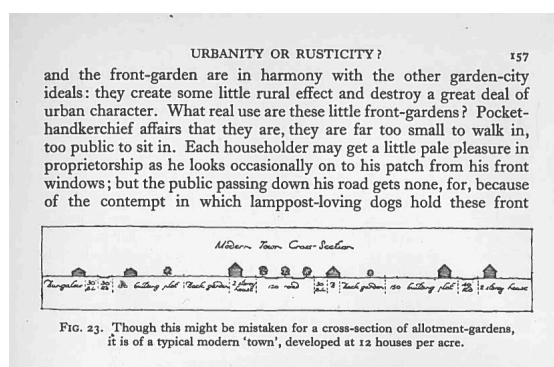
lecture series. Launched by Lewis Keeble in 1981, it has featured all the great and the good of our profession: it's an honour to follow in their footsteps.

I was doubly grateful for the invitation because it prompted me to search all Thomas Sharp's books from the UCL library and reread them for the first time in years. He reads as well as ever - as his biographer Kathy Stansfield puts it, 'like his native landscape [the coalfield of County Durham] he was never insipid; pessimistic and melancholy at times, but inspiring and dramatic at others, he was challenging, stubborn and uncompromising to a fault'.²

Thomas Sharp was at his most inspiring and stubborn on the topic of streets, giving the word particular emphasis in *Town and Countryside* : 'let us have *streets* of houses grouped closely together, clean in their symbolism of social order, pure strong and independent in their material beauty' .³ During the war he was asked to draft a manual on 'civic design' for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. The manuscript, never published, opens with a crystal-clear axiom '*the street is the urban unit of design*' .⁴ Sharp always looked for continuous building to form street walls, defining the public realm. He detested scatter, arguing that the same principles of compactness and enclosure should apply to the smallest village as to the largest city. The most amusing image in *Town and Countryside* is his figure 23, with its caption:

Though this might be mistaken for a cross-section of allotment-gardens, it is of a typical modern 'town', developed at 12 houses per acre. ⁵

John Pendlebury sums up it in a single word: Sharp was an urbanist.



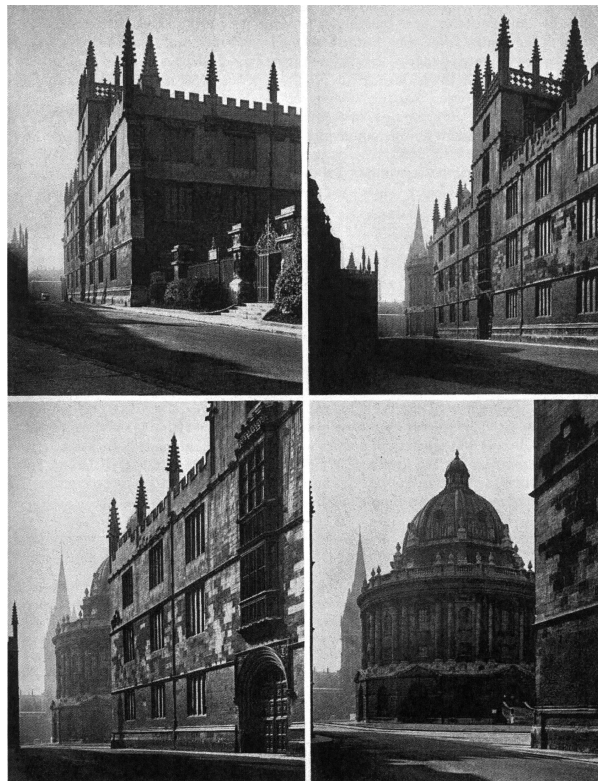
² 1974 150

³ 1932 164

⁴ Pendlebury 2009 8

⁵ 1932 157

Urbanist is a hip thing to be today. Given the current interest in street design and management it seems timely to revisit Thomas Sharp's work on the topic. My lecture title was meant to pay homage to another of his best-selling books, *Anatomy of a Village*, published by Penguin in 1946. On reflection, though, the anatomical metaphor offers a poor fit. Anatomy is atemporal, its positions and structures are fixed and static, whereas Sharp's notion of the street is all about dynamism. A reviewer aptly compared his theory of the street corridor to a Chinese scroll painting, 'a picture to be read in sections yet in continuity'.⁶ Sharp claimed to have invented the term 'townscape' to describe the kinetic experience of moving between street walls, with buildings to either side revealing themselves along the way. He described it in prose and in photographic sequences such as his famous progress down Catte St, Oxford:



Alternatively he used poetry to describe the kinetic experience of townscape, as in this 32-line perambulation up Oxford's High Street from Magdalen Bridge to Carfax:-

". . . Now the townly buildings, and the green
 Bosoming of that marvellous tree
 Foil the predominant store a space,
 Till straightly, suddenly,
 From the receding southern face
 Comes out St Mary's tower and fretted spire
 Powerfully urgent, hesitates, moves free,
 Resolves about the central sky, to ride
 Topping All Souls: a few yards more and then,
 Beyond long pinnacled nave and twisting porch,
 Out from the curve again, by Brasenose gables,

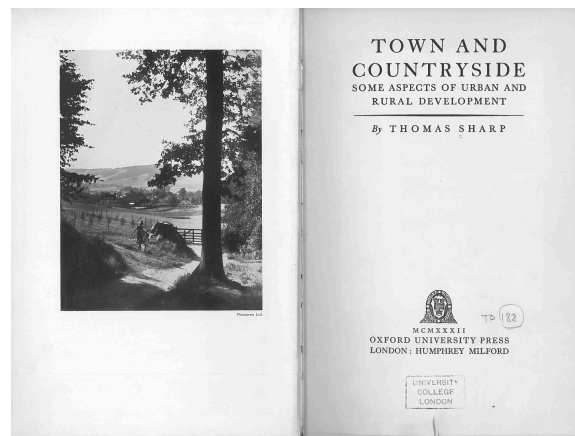
⁶ Anon 1948

Straightly leaps in, Ordered with a cunning difference,
The storeyed tower of Aldrich's own church —
Two splendoured heights, as though for the street's pride
Merely the one insistent incident
Were too poor riches. . ."

The relativity of a shifting perspective applies equally to us as we look back at Thomas Sharp's street theory and try to position it in twentieth century planning history. What you see depends where you stand and how you frame the object. In the next part of my talk, I apply the narrow frame of Sharp's own lifetime, as an obituarist would, indeed as he did himself in his unpublished autobiographical manuscript here in the Robinson Library. Then the time-frame is extended to the present day. As always in the writing of history, we will find that the choice of perspective determines the story to be told.

2. *Chronicle of Failure*

Thomas Sharp was born in 1901 and died in 1978. He was just over thirty when his first book, *Town and Countryside*, was published in handsome 8vo format by Oxford University Press.



At the time of writing he was living in industrial Lancashire and unemployed after resigning from employment with the South West Lancashire Regional Planning Advisory Group because they had not attributed his authorial contribution as planning assistant to their 1930 strategy.⁷ It's an angry book, attacking urban sprawl and rural blight in much the same tone as Clough Williams-Ellis's *England and the Octopus*, J B Priestley's *English Journey* or, twenty years on, Iain Nairn's *Outrage*. But the new and shocking aspect of Sharp's polemic was that he named Sir Ebenezer Howard as the culprit, directing his most scathing attacks on the sacred cows of the planning movement - Garden Cities, Garden Suburbs, public open space, and Homes for Heroes at ideal densities of twelve to the acre. He attacked these typologies because they were anti-

⁷ Stansfield 1981 151

street, scattering buildings in a manner that denied the possibility of urban space and broke down the basic, axiomatic distinction between Town and Country. In a famous passage he derided Howard's vision of the 'third magnet', a Garden City combining the best of urban and rural, as

a hermaphrodite; sterile, imbecile, a monster; abhorrent and loathsome to the Nature which he worships.⁸

Or:

Tradition has broken down, Taste is utterly debased. There is no enlightened guidance or correction from authority. The town . . . is being annihilated by a flabby, shoddy, romantic nature-worship. . . Two diametrically opposed, dramatically contrasting, inevitable types of beauty are being displaced by one drab, revolting neutrality.⁹

And again:

Let us again build TOWNS. Let us be rid once and for all of the beastliness of the Hermaphrodite, with its neutrality, its sterility, its deformed and unnatural ugliness.¹⁰

Thomas Sharp was so uniquely eloquent that he has sometimes been seen in prophetic isolation, a voice in the wilderness. As Stephen Ward has emphasized, that is to misunderstand his significance in planning history. He was by no means alone in his advocacy of a modern street-based urbanism, distinct in equal measure from Garden-City romanticism and from the Modernist rationalism of Corbusier, Gropius and CIAM. It echoed many of those contemporary European experiments in the design of reformed perimeter blocks and improved streets, which have recently been brought together in Wolfgang Sonne's monumental study of density and urbanity in the twentieth century city.¹¹ Lionel Esher in *Broken Wave* (1981) brackets him with the housing reformer Elizabeth Denby, leading exponent of the Dutch and Scandinavian 'new empiricism'. There were British echoes too, in the work of Professor Stanley Adshead of UCL and Professor Sir Charles Reilly of Liverpool, and the writings of Geoffrey Boumphrey and the Welsh architect and cartographer Arthur Trystan Edwards, with whom Sharp struck up a correspondence in 1932. Edward's scheme for a hundred new towns, published in 1933 under the pseudonym of his naval service number J47485, sets out most clearly

⁸ 1932 140

⁹ 1932 11

¹⁰ 1932 164

¹¹ Sonne 2014

Oxford and Bath. Drawing on Pevsner's archives at the Getty Institute, the Architectural Press archive at RIBA and the Thomas Sharp papers here in Newcastle, Erdem Erten has chronicled the collaboration to its climax in Architectural Press's publication of the postwar consultancy reports prepared by Sharp for Durham, Exeter, Oxford and Salisbury.



The press also published a revised edition of *English Panorama* (1950), offering Sharp a chance to elaborate his concept of urbanism - a Modernist city without 'the aerial roads . . . the topless towers and all the rest of the rather nightmarish properties of Corbusierean fantasy'.¹² For central areas he foresaw striking changes of appearance to meet the requirements of ventilation, daylighting and traffic circulation: 'the continuous façade of the Street as it has hitherto been known will give place to a more broken and more open form in which adjoining buildings will have recessed and even separated tower-like upper storeys'.¹³ Residential neighbourhoods would be formed of a 'newer, freer, less formal' version of terraces and squares.¹⁴ Sharp makes it clear that he is no revivalist or neo-traditionalist: he regards pastiche as futile. The aim is to adapt historic forms to new purposes, learning from rather than imitating the past. Gilbey House in Camden Town (Serge Chermayeff, 1937) and Peter Jones in Sloane Square (William Crabtree, 1936) illustrate how 'the best of the buildings of the past two decades have recovered something of the urbanity of the great age of town building' (1950 142).

¹² 1950 110

¹³ 1950 109

¹⁴ 1950 112



Alas, this third way turned out to be a dead end. Postwar planning showed little interest in street design. Hierarchical highway layout and car-parking requirements, functional zoning, solipsistic architecture and public open space standards each exerted their toll. Sharp's complaint in 1932 that modern planning had made streets illegal applied with double force in postwar decades, when highway access could be restricted through development control powers, and every urban renewal project and large-site development offered opportunities to eliminate frontage and reorient building away from the thoroughfare. Existing streets were transformed into highways by road widening, pavement shrinkage, installation of pedestrian barriers, removal of street trees, building-line set-backs, and junction visibility splays. Whether or not the word 'street' was taboo, as Sharp alleged it had been in prewar Garden cities, the postwar New Towns were effectively street-free. Meanwhile the concept of Townscape, popularized through the graphic genius of Gordon Cullen, broke away from its original morphological basis to become a footloose visual metaphor, incongruously borrowing from Italian hill-towns and Cornish fishing villages for application in the concrete walkways of mass housing projects. In his 1975 book *The Man in the Street: a Polemic on Urbanism*, the best Shadrach Woods could hope for was street-like chances to meet face-to-face, on foot, within a world of free-flow highway engineering and widely-spaced superblocks.

Nothing better illustrates the impasse of this strain of modernism than its omission from the historical narrative. Thomas Sharp's last years overlapped with the success of

Gordon Cherry, Anthony Sutcliffe and others in building up a network of historians and a body of literature - with its own still-vigorous journal *Planning Perspectives* - around the history of planning in Britain and internationally. An outstanding exponent, and author of several prime texts, was the man who gave this very lecture two years ago, my doctoral supervisor and much-lamented Bartlett colleague, Professor Sir Peter Hall. Peter Hall's version of the history of planning thought has many virtues, but like Gordon Cherry's it's played out in terms of a dualism between the Garden City and Corbusian modernism. Peter Hall's later writings repeatedly return to Ebenezer Howard and his 'third magnet' as a wellspring of inspiration for contemporary planning. The alternative tradition of critical urbanism to which Thomas Sharp belonged has disappeared from view.



Kathy Stansfield, his biographer, describes Sharp's bitterness in retirement and how he solaced it by walking the streets of Oxford. Given an honourable and productive career at the pinnacle of his profession, he was certainly over-harsh on himself in titling his unpublished autobiography *A Chronicle of Failure*. But in terms of the trajectory mid-twentieth century urbanism, that's what it was.



3. *Posthumous vindication ?*

Let's now extend the timeframe by forty years and consider Sharp's theory of the street from a perspective of the here and now. We can look back to him in his pomp as President of the Town Planning Institute in 1943-6. He was the best-selling author in the

field; freshly promoted to a Readership after the war, he had returned to Newcastle to design and launch the very first undergraduate planning degree - a five year programme, exactly like Architecture, leading to an honours degree in Arts. He expected a new department to be created, with himself as its founding professor. When that failed to transpire, he quit the University and moved south to set up a consultancy in Oxford.

In his unpublished autobiography Sharp blamed the rebuff on the academic machinations and personal pique of the Professor of Geography, George Daysh. But Daysh had given serious thought to the skill requirements of planners. He recognised planning as a policy process and put research, evidence and consensus-building at the centre. With a geographer's eye, he saw practitioners as generalists capable of appreciating the interplay of physical and human aspects within a multidisciplinary research environment.¹⁵ Sharp, on the other hand, was uninterested in teamwork and he considered the art of designing 'fine sheer towns that will make their inhabitants proud to live in them' too important to be left to local democracy. In 'Plan We Must', the remarkable final chapter of *Town Planning* (1940), he envisages a transfer of power to Regional Sub-Commissions reporting to a Central Planning Commission for the nation. The vision is top-down, one-dimensional and paternalist - the politics of disagreement and negotiation played no part in it.

Sharp's blithe unawareness of pluralism is perfectly demonstrated in his theory of the street. He saw the town planner as scenographer, ingeniously manipulating streetscape and skyline in the interests of picturesqueness :

Every individual street should be regarded as an architectural composition, a composed unity, a single entity designed with the most deliberate art for pictorial effect . . . Even factory chimneys and the gasometer could be utilized for studied ordered effect if we chose.¹⁶

Post-mortems on Sharp's own plans for Exeter, Durham, Oxford, Salisbury and Chichester would reveal the limitations of this perspective.¹⁷ Real-world streets were never single entities designed with most deliberate art, so much as social constructions shaped by the work of many hands, whether as architectural site, commercial location, as infrastructure of carriage-ways, pavements, pipework, as ecological realm and microclimate, as market-place or arena for social interaction, civic life, political change.

¹⁵ See Daysh 1948 and Daysh & O'Dell 1947

¹⁶ 1940 102, 107

¹⁷ While and Tait 2009; Larkham 2009

Each facet has its own chronology, running at different speeds and sometimes in different directions. To understand the history of the late twentieth century street demands multiple narratives. In the remainder of my lecture I want to take the perspectives of six sets of actors or stakeholders whose actions collectively make streets.

Let's begin with the architects. They led the way when the baby-boomer generation of designers came of age, reaccepting the street which their predecessors had rejected: Nan Ellin's *Post-Modern Urbanism* (1999) and Geoffrey Broadbent's *Emerging Trends in Urban Space Design* (1990) tell the tale. While the rehabilitation offered the minority a chance to revert to pre-modern architectural styles, as at Poundbury, the concern of the mainstream was to reclaim the urban street within a Modernist canon: this was the point of Aldo Rossi's hugely influential *Architettura della Città* (1966) and the equally seminal *Collage City* of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter. In the British context the rehabilitation process reached a climax in the launch of CAFE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and the appointment of Richard (Lord) Rogers to lead the British government's Urban Task Force: promoting architectural excellence and street-based urbanism seemed to be two sides of a single coin.



But architecture is a fashion victim. After the millennium designers' interest in public space was overtaken by three trends that had little to offer street-making, indeed were antagonistic to it: the cult of iconic buildings, sculpted at the digital drawing-board with

curves and angles that demanded isolation of the architectural object from its urban setting; the vogue for tall buildings and sky profiles ; and a new, paradoxical, use of the word urbanism, as in 'landscape urbanism', to justify rejection of urban tissue in the name of environmental and ecological values.¹⁸

The waning of architectural interest mattered less than you might expect: other stakeholders were filling the void. Environmentalists for example. They had traditionally sought - to Thomas Sharp's exasperation - to bring nature into the city by breaking apart the street canyon. Now they began to discover the climatic merits and resource efficiencies of the *Stadt der kurzen Wege* - the city of short distances, with its compact grid, mixed land-use, and thermal sharing. Enhanced techniques of atmospheric data-collection and modelling helped to vindicate the microclimates of external street canyons and internal courtyards and gardens, revealing how they retain warmth and offer shelter in cold climates and provide shade in hot.

A similar shift was occurring in the field of public health. Over most of the twentieth century medical orthodoxy had favoured strategies of density reduction and dispersal. Since the 1990s, however, epidemiological evidence has revealed the green suburb to be an obesogenic environment, characterised by high rates of physical inactivity. Compact urban settings, by contrast, involve walking as an everyday practice. For the first time, the built-up grid of streets, squares, boulevards and bounded parks begins to appear as an exemplary setting for public health.

The most important paradigm shift was occurring amongst transport professionals. For most of the twentieth century they had regarded the traditional urban street as an anachronism. Its mixtures of modes and speeds and its congested junctions offended the basic tenets of hierarchical highway design. The optimal form of the city was assumed to be a mesh of free-flowing arterial routes enclosing areas of local access zones. Early experiments in street-based urban design encountered implacable opposition in highway engineering rule-books such as the British *Design Manual for Roads and Bridges* or the US Green Book.¹⁹ Towards the millennium a significant change of perspective occurred.²⁰ The distinctiveness of urban streets began to be recognised in measures such as the

¹⁸ Jencks 2006

¹⁹ Hebbert 2005

²⁰ Vega-Barachowitz et al 2013

reduction of speed limits to 20 mph or less, the stripping out of pedestrian barriers, road pricing, reallocation of roadspace from private vehicles to public transport, pedestrians and cyclists, the 'complete streets' movement, and Transportation Demand Management (TDM) techniques. The automobile bias in the methodologies used to assess network performance and project impacts was acknowledged, if by no means eliminated. In the Department for Transport's *Manual for Streets* (2007), or the rewrite of the U.S. National Association of City Transportation Officials' *Urban Street Design Guide* (2013) and the *Livability in Transportation Guidebook* of the Federal Highway Administration (2015) formerly street-hostile policy guidance has been radically revised. Leading cities such as Paris, New York and London already enjoy tangible environmental and economic dividends from the shift.



The real estate industry has also played its part. Developers accepted the inescapable constraints of street-based sites in town centres but customarily shunned them elsewhere. Market wisdom favoured single-purpose schemes that minimized risk and offered a best fit with sector-specific funding sources, insurance packages and regulatory requirements. Today the property press reports growing interest in mixed-use developments and mixed walkable neighbourhoods. For the first time in a century new suburban projects are emerging at high density along the streets that lead to public transport nodes, with Vancouver and Perth as leading exemplars of transit-oriented development. The supply side is catching up with the life-styles of consumers who expect to walk or cycle rather than drive, and employees who spend less time at their desks and more in the public realm, because their business ITC has merged seamlessly with their personal mobile technology. Their daily routines dissolve conventional

boundaries between living and working. That is why corporate offices are emptying out and companies shifting back from suburban office parks to city centres with their extended public realm of streets, eateries, bars, barbers and coffee shops.

Beyond all these shifts lie deeper shifts in social behaviour and consumer demand. Market research highlights the significance of the demographic factor. Other things being equal, the life-styles and consumption patterns of the X, Y and Millennial generations (born from 1965, 1977 and 2000 respectively) favour dense street-type settings. Back in 1929 D. H. Lawrence said of the English that 'they don't know how to build a city, how to think of one, or how to live in one. They are all suburban pseudo-cottagey, and not one of them knows how to be truly urban'.²¹ Thomas Sharp quotes those words in the opening paragraph of *Town Planning* (1940) - they're the launch-pad for his entire polemic. Do they make sense today? The hipster generation thinks not.



And it's in this context that the topic of my lecture assumes a fresh significance. As John Pendlebury puts it:

Sharp's ideas about the need for a contemporary modern urban form based around the street, well designed without overly contrived showiness, seem as relevant as ever, if as elusive to achieve'.²²

4. Sharp's Last Stand

In this lecture I've tried to show the importance of streets and the need to design and manage them aright. Various words have been used to describe this activity: townscape,

²¹ 1940 15

²² 2009 23

place-making, urban design, urbanism, New Urbanism, sustainable urbanism: or simply, town planning . . . Whatever we call it, this process is collective and collaborative. It's undoubtedly team-work, not the prerogative of any one profession. Thomas Sharp saw it differently. He thought town planners could assert monopoly rights over street-making. In 1948 his evidence to the Schuster Committee on Qualifications of Planners argued that planning was a specialized field of design and should be one man's responsibility alone.²³ Two decades later he led the opposition to proposals that would have opened up membership of the Town Planning Institute on an interdisciplinary basis.



Let's end as we began with Sharp in fighting-cock mode, as described in Gordon Cherry's account of the Institute's Extraordinary General Meeting in Church House on January 29th 1965:

After an introduction by the President, Sharp spoke vigorously in colourful language. He thought the memorandum [*Membership Policy*] one-sided and tendentious, and as a method of obtaining support, he 'had never heard of such extraordinary procedures outside a totalitarian regime'. He thought the arguments advanced about town planning and team work 'damnable and pernicious nonsense'. The nub of his objection was that the Institute was a separate and distinct profession. It was beyond his understanding that the

²³ Stansfield 1974 172

Council had 'allowed itself to become so bemused by these specious arguments about teamwork as actually itself to become the instrument of our destruction.²⁴ The membership rallied behind him and the Council was defeated. As Kathy Stansfield puts it, 'it was Sharp's last stand, and one which allowed the Institute to continue to resist for a while changes which were to prove irresistible and which were to isolate [him] still further'²⁵.

So in this matter of professional qualification of planners Thomas Sharp won the battle but lost the war. I have tried to show that in the matter of streets and their importance for successful towns and cities, the reverse is true. Thomas Sharp lost the policy battle in his lifetime but today we just might be winning the war.

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²⁴ Cherry 1974 205-6

²⁵ 1974 172

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