



Urban morphology and planning: the case of fringe belts

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Urban morphological concepts are weakly represented in Anglophone city planning. Where local plans in the UK are concerned with historical landscapes, attention is devoted principally to individual buildings, sites and monuments, or small areas of special interest: concepts concerned with the historico-geographical structure of entire cities or sizeable parts of cities are largely ignored. This paper is concerned with one such concept, the fringe belt, focusing on the actions of local planners and others influencing the development of fringe belts after they have become embedded within urban areas. The study of the Edwardian fringe belt of Birmingham, UK, suggests that there has been increased pressure since the 1960s to redevelop fringe-belt plots and use them more intensively, but the fringe belt has retained much of its identity despite its lack of recognition in the local plan. Decision-making about proposals to redevelop fringe-belt plots has frequently been protracted, reflecting the profitability of redevelopment, the large size of many of the plots, the large number of interested parties, and the scope for different interpretations of planning policies. Within the local authority, it has been characterized by changes in policies, and disagreements among those taking and influencing decisions. The piecemeal, poorly co-ordinated pattern of decision making underlines the need for planning to take greater account of the historico-geographical structure of cities.

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Introduction

The relationship between urban morphology and planning is poorly developed in the English-speaking world. This is particularly evident in the weak representation of urban morphological concepts in both the theory and practice of planning. Even the fringe-belt concept, which has been the subject of investigation by urban morphologists for over half a century, is rarely referred to by planners, despite the initial recognition of fringe belts as deriving from one of the most obvious products of early European planning: the fortification zones surrounding medieval and Renaissance cities.

The term *Stadtrandzone* (in English “urban fringe belt”, but commonly shortened to “fringe belt”) was first applied by the geographer Herbert Louis (1936) to the zone of extensive land use that developed at the urban fringe during pronounced hiatuses in urban growth, among which those asso-

ciated with city fortifications were especially obvious. Following renewed urban growth, such low-density zones were generally not acquired for housebuilding, but became successively embedded within the urban area, surviving as recognizably distinct zones separating older from younger residential development.

Subsequent researchers gave increasing attention to the fringe belt as a concept—a way of understanding the process of alternating hiatus and growth, and the subsequent processes of transformation of the alternating fringe belts and zones of residential accretion. The classic study was that of the English market town of Alnwick by Conzen (1960). A few years later, the development of three fringe belts and intervening zones of residential accretion was traced in Newcastle upon Tyne (Whitehand, 1967). Thereafter, studies of fringe belts multiplied, as the concept was taken up in several other countries (see, for example, Conzen, 2002; Rodrigo Cervantes, 1999; Vilagrassa, 1990).

Though the fringe-belt concept has been developed almost beyond recognition since it was

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first formulated by Louis, much of the research has been on chronologies of development, especially over long periods, and little attempt has been made to explore fringe belts in relation to decision makers and decision making, or in relation to plan making and development control. In Great Britain, this is not a consequence of a lack of interest in history amongst planners and others with responsibility for the built environment—the designation of conservation areas, listed buildings and parks and gardens of special historic interest, for example, belies such an explanation. More significant is the lack of awareness of the wider historico-geographical structure of cities. Among those with a custodial concern for the built environment, attention is devoted largely to individual buildings, sites and monuments, or small areas of special interest: the emphasis is on individual features or small areas, rather than the historico-geographical structuring of entire cities or sizeable parts of cities. This deficiency is very evident in UK government publications on historical environments (see, for example, [Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001](#)).

Since fringe belts are significant elements in the historico-geographical structuring of cities, they merit a great deal more consideration than they have received, both in relation to planning and more generally in relation to the agents and agencies of change in the city. Their significance for environmental awareness is inseparable from their historical development. Of course, they provide practical geographical orientation by providing a sense of position within or on the edge of the city, but at a deeper level of appreciation they provide a historico-geographical frame of reference within which the phases of development, and physical forms, of previous societies are related to the physical configurations of present cities. There is clearly much more to an appreciation of this role than the recognition of individual sites of historical and architectural significance. The fringe-belt concept reflects a more holistic cultural-environmental view of cities: the many individual features that make up the urban scene take on added cultural significance from the way in which they relate to one another and combine to form historically composite urban landscapes.

Among the most striking fringe belts in Great Britain are those that came into existence at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, especially during the slump in house-building between roughly 1908 and 1925. They are often referred to as Edwardian fringe belts in England, reflecting the propensity of the English to name historical periods after their monarchs. In that country, Edwardian fringe belts separate two physically contrasting housing zones: that of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, characterized by “bye-law” terraced houses, and that of the

inter-war period, characterized by semi-detached houses with “universal” plans.

Fringe belts generally, and Edwardian fringe belts in particular, have a number of attributes that make them of contemporary relevance, not least to planning. These include (a) the virtual absence of housing; (b) a sparse road network, with a low incidence of radial roads (i.e. running across the fringe belt), and hence constituting a barrier zone to vehicles, although those radial roads that do exist (being historical arterial roads leading out of the city) tend to be heavily used; (c) large, often well-vegetated plots, frequently containing institutional, sometimes “landmark”, buildings of architectural note; and (d) the fact that they form a boundary between historically and morphologically distinct housing areas.

Most of the parameters to which this characterization of fringe belts relates, such as land use, vehicular movement, access and vegetation cover, are taken into consideration in local plans in the UK but, with very rare exceptions ([Kropf, 2001](#)), fringe belts themselves are not. While the fringe-belt concept integrates various aspects of the environment, local plans are much more sectional. Paradoxically, fringe belts survive within urban areas as physical entities redolent of the history of cities, but local plans and central government policy documents, including those on historical environments, scarcely mention them. The survival of fringe belts reflects a constellation of factors that has little to do with the recognition of fringe belts as entities.

Many of the factors that account for the survival and changing character of fringe belts, such as the dependence on fringe-belt features that develops among other land users in the vicinity and the locational inertia induced by increased investment in sites, particularly by institutions, have been adduced in the past by the analysis of chronologies of landscape change (for example, [Conzen, 1968](#); [Whitehand, 1967](#)) and the application of adaptations of bid-rent theory (for example, [Barke, 1990](#); [Whitehand, 1972](#)). The approach in this paper is a rather different but complementary one, in which greater attention is given to the framework of central, and especially local, government planning, and to the actions and interactions of those influencing, or seeking to influence, decisions about development.

This emphasis needs to be seen in the context of a post-war environment in the UK in which the expansion of urban areas has been constrained, the value of potential and actual building land has undergone a marked secular rise ([Department of the Environment, 1992: p. 23](#); [Vallis, 1972](#); [Valuation Office, 2000: p. 35](#)) and, especially within the last two decades, central government has placed increasing emphasis on the more intensive development of existing urban areas. By far the most

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