1. Towards Radical Comparative Urban Studies

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CHAPTER 1
TOWARDS RADICAL COMPARATIVE URBAN STUDIES

Introduction

In this book I focus on a particular situation that may occur in the broad, long-term process of human inhabitation of the world. When people settle in a particular location and the population starts to rise, the landscape becomes increasingly manipulated through human-environment interactions that accommodate how that residency functions. Simply put, within this book, living in a landscape of our own making will be referred to as the ‘inhabited built environment’ (see Chapter 3 for a theoretical treatise). Furthermore, my focus is directed to situations that are considered ‘urban’. Because ‘urban’ characterises the life, activities, provisions, and all things to do with cities, it is a problematic term. Cities and therefore urban life have existed for millennia. Currently over half the world’s population is considered to reside in cities. Yet, no single definition of the city is agreed upon. Disquietude over the lack of such definition has certainly not impeded cities as a substantive field of research. This even applies to the extent that having a categorical definition of the city could be counterproductive for some research in the first place (e.g. Smith 1989). Currently, the city or urbanism is a research theme in several disciplines and is increasingly represented by the field of urban studies.

Taking urban landscapes as the result of ongoing essentially human processes of inhabitation makes them a deeply historical phenomenon. Consequently, we must heed archaeological and historical thought on the origins of ‘urban situations’, alongside a social theoretical position towards urbanisation as a general process in human social life. Urban ‘inhabited built environments’ can only become a concept
informing comparative methodological development within a context that explicitly defines my particular perspective on urbanism. This chapter will therefore lay the groundwork for studying the urban comparatively by anthologising disciplinary approaches which characterise the nature of urbanism, and by offering a process-based working definition of the city which centres on the practices of urban life. Subsequently, I will explain how comparative urbanism, broadly conceived, initially requires low-level interpretation instead of high levels of particular contextualisation. This groundwork then enables new theoretical and methodological work supporting research on the urban landscape as a social process.

**Urban studies**

For the foreseeable future the rapid urbanisation of the world is widely recognised as one of the major humanitarian global challenges (Dittmar 2013). It is therefore no surprise that urbanism should be at the forefront of research development. Urban studies is not a traditional academic discipline. Despite representation in many institutions and specialised research journals, its core area of interest is still fragmented over many academic disciplines. Nonetheless, Bowen et al. (2010) demonstrate that there is considerable coherence amongst the intellectual pursuits associated with urban studies. Importantly, Harris & Smith (2011) point out that Bowen et al.’s (2010) analysis of the field overlooks the significant presence of, and contributions made to, urban research from historical vantage points.

The deep historical nature of the processes of human inhabitation of the world was already recognised, so with the advancements in this book I deliberately intend to include all of human history: from prehistory to the present. The settling process that keeps on increasing the world’s urbanised population is fundamentally human. Therefore, to contribute a comparative understanding of the conditions and characteristics of urban life requires a perspective that accommodates the fundamentally human diversity in settlement patterns across cultures and through time. Any single piece of work is unlikely to accomplish a satisfying cross-section representing all instances of urban life. Instead, my investigations centre on how to start a body of research based on commensurable foundations which could come to encompass the diversity of cities.

To achieve commensurable research we must first establish the availability of equivalent information on urban places across time and
space. Any archaeologist would be quick to point out that the material record, which their discipline is based upon, is probably the best preserved information source throughout the deep past of human life. Furthermore, no anthropologist would deny that material culture is part and parcel of continuing human life, society and culture (see Miller 1998, 2005). The material record naturally includes the dimension, shape and material composition of inhabited landscapes or urban built environments. Kropf (2009: 117) states: ‘The tangibility, ubiquity and persistence of physical form make it the most suited to act as the point of reference for co-ordinating and comparing aspects.’ The same is asserted by Harris & Smith (2011: 103), who note:

arguably the most enduring characteristic of cities, one that almost invariably forms the basis of their definition, concerns their physical presence. They are dense, well-populated settlements with considerable investment in the built environment, and other infrastructural components. We can, and do, debate exactly how large, or how dense, a place has to be to count as urban, but hardly anyone doubts that size matters.

All of Parr’s (2007) ‘spatial definitions’ of the city initially refer to the developed area, the physical entity, before characterising three kinds of socio-functional city. So it becomes a reasonable expectation that to embark on a methodological development for the social interpretations comparing the full range of urban possibilities throughout human history, our first port of call comprises the physical transformation of the landscape. Intense and relatively large-scale inhabitation of the landscape is accommodated by such physical transformations, even though we may not always be able to retrieve all modifications.

The notion of comparative urbanism already exists in urban studies and urban geography. However, Smith (2009b) draws attention to the fact that considering the breadth and depth of urban traditions, comparative urban geography displays a severely limited historical scope (see Briggs 2004 for an exception). Urban studies with explicit reference to the physical and architectural characteristics of the built environment regularly demonstrate historical interest (e.g. Bastian 1980; Daunton 1983; Lawrence 1996; Rotenberg 1996; Jenkins 2002). Yet, they rarely penetrate deeper than about two centuries’ worth (the medieval underpinnings of urban morphology (Conzen 1960) and Kostof’s (1991, 1992) well-known historically descriptive classifications of urban form are exceptions). This apparent historical myopia has been noted in both human geographical
urban and planning interests (Nijman 2007; Smith 2009b; Harris & Smith 2011; York et al. 2011) as well as historical geography in particular. Often the early modern period acts as the earliest starting point (Jones 2004; Lilley 2011b). The particular field of urban historical geography (see Dennis & Prince 1988; Denecke 1988, discussing British and German research practice respectively), which maintains an allegiance with urban morphology (Conzen 1960; Moudon 1997), did cautiously venture into the early medieval period (e.g. Denecke & Shaw 1988). Yet, this has not resulted in a more structural presence of historical depth. There is no clear reason why this preoccupation with recentism should prevail. On the contrary, from the perspective of human or society-space relations and the ongoing processes of urbanisation, there is much to gain by structurally engaging the building processes composing the urban *longue durée*.

Urban studies and urban geography not only suffer from temporal myopia; they have culturally favoured western and globalised examples of urban form (Wheatley 1969; Graham 1996; see Edensor & Jayne 2012 for a recent attempt to intervene). The urban alternatives (cf. Smith 2012) that different areas of the world, undergoing their own environmental and cultural evolution, have known before industrialisation and globalisation have been neglected or brushed aside, together with all ancient or ‘pre-industrial’ urban traditions (see Graham 1996) in several seminal texts on urbanism (e.g. Mumford 1961; Sjoberg 1960; Fox 1977).¹ This cultural preoccupation could in part be explained by the desire to formulate successful planning policies, acting as a driver for inquiry in practice. When accepting that urban planning today takes place amidst the stage of, and in response to, political and economic globalisation (Massey 2007; Newman & Thornley 2011; Knox & Mayer 2013; Faulconbridge & Grubbauer 2015), there is the temptation to apply the unifying structure of globalism to highlight urban individualism, which stands in the way of improving our understanding of cities (Scott & Storper 2015). Habraken (2000: 10) concedes:

> The necessity of a disciplined and detached stance, so self-evident in the natural sciences, is by no means self-evident in studies of the built environment. We are fully immersed in the object of our inquiry – in fact, we are part of it – and value judgments color our every observation.

¹. Rather worryingly, some myopia persists even now. In Clark’s (2013) *Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* the presence of Pre-Colombian cities is severely marginalised and in so doing misrepresented.
While I will not join Habraken in his recommendation to advance in a natural scientific fashion, I call to supersede the western embedding of urban scholarship. This is not to favour postcolonial particularism, but to inform comparative methods with the essentially human and social phenomenon of urbanism as occurring in geographically and culturally separated traditions (cf. Scott & Storper 2015; Peck 2015). Planning and design professionals have much to gain from trading normative assertions or particularism and ‘difference-finding’ (see Peck 2015) for analytical insights derived from common frames of reference with appropriately defined units of analysis. From this vantage, comparison permits difference to emerge and becomes articulated and meaningful (Scott & Storper 2015). Such more rigorous and radical comparative work could open our eyes to the lessons concealed in the alternative solutions humanity has lived through, emanating from the common developmental processes of settling and cohabitation. Only recently signs are emerging that deeply historical and radical comparisons may be welcomed for applications in sustainable development policies (Barthel & Isendahl 2013; Simon & Adam-Bradford 2016).

Coming from an archaeological perspective, Fletcher (2010: 253) remarks that to suppose the world’s wildly varying urban traditions ‘had equivalent socialities would strain the contextual uniqueness of human social life’. Yet, also in archaeology it applies that to launch research from specific culture historical contexts (cf. the ideographic tendencies of comparative urbanism in human geography) would grind insights to a halt, resulting in isolated statements on particularities (contextual interpretation will be discussed later). A fuller appreciation of ancient urban traditions as examples of the same social processes as current urbanisation holds great potential for increasing our understanding of urban challenges today (see Smith 2010a, 2012). The challenge for (archaeological) research is to come up with rigorous comparative frames of reference and critical analytical methods or measures to make this holistic process-driven approach productive (Smith 2012; Smith & Peregrine 2012).

In fact, it has long been recognised (Pollard 1977: 46) that ‘[a]rchaeologists, in particular, have much to offer to increase our understanding of the structure and functioning of urban settlements’. Yet, data constraints and the specificity of disciplinary foci have made efforts to structurally address this potential scarce. More recently, however, it could be argued that technological advancements and accumulated archaeological data have made it much more feasible to undertake comparative research on the deeper functional history
of urbanism (Smith 2012). To date, most archaeological efforts have addressed urbanism at the level of urban origins and the scale of settlement patterns. In part, this is undoubtedly due to the overwhelming influence of Childe’s (1950) pivotal proposal of the ‘Urban Revolution’ (Smith 2009a) and, in part, by the fragmentary and limited nature of archaeological data.

Urban origins

The debate on the origin of cities is closely tied to defining the city as a category and classifying different kinds of cities (e.g. Wirth 1938; Fox 1977). Even though this research is little to do with demarcating the principal nature of the city – accepting that the urban is an extant mundane situation – much foundational and deep historical urban thought has sprung from these concerns. In order to explain the principles of a low-level interpretive comparative urbanism based on a process-oriented working definition of the city, one should be aware of the wider context in which cities emerge as both a phenomenon and a research concept. 3

Childe’s contribution to urban research was part of a much larger body of thought, which included an economic critique and reimagining of the prehistoric three-age system and an influential position on the culture-historical approach as applied to material culture. His socio-economic evolutionary concepts went on to find wide appeal and form a major influence across historical disciplines into the 1990s (Greene 1999). He coined the term the Urban Revolution (amongst others, such as the Neolithic Revolution, inspired by the quick changes of the modern Industrial Revolution) to mark the process of transformation from primarily agricultural societies into more complex, state-based, urban societies. Adam T. Smith (2003) emphasises that Childe was more directly concerned with state formation (cf. Smith 2009a on complex societies) than with urbanism as a concurring phenomenon, in spite of the ordinary

2. Smith (2009a) discusses how Childe’s first presentation of this term appeared in his 1936 book *Man Makes Himself*, but how his more accessible paper from 1950, ‘The Urban Revolution’, went on to become one of the most widely cited papers published by an archaeologist. The latter is generally recognised as the full-fledged discussion of his ideas on urbanism, though these should be seen as part of a wider appreciation of the emergence of complex societies characterised by many traits which are also of importance as urban features.

3. It should be noted here that Scott & Storper (2015) opened the debate on the questions of ‘what cities are’ and ‘why they are’ as a critique of the current state of theorising in urban studies and the aforementioned particularism of comparative urban research (Peck 2015; Mould 2016; Walker 2016; Storper & Scott 2016). The vantage and definitions developed in this chapter could be seen as a stance in this unresolved debate. However, despite the
archaeological reading of his work emphasising the emergence and traits of urbanism. In addition, Wheatley (1972: 612) points out that Childe (1950) isolated only one primary dependent variable in the generation of urbanism: ‘the progress of technology, resulting in the augmentation of food surpluses’. Consequently, according to Wheatley, Childe succeeded in demarcating a stage of development rather than establishing the process of the Urban Revolution.

Childe’s persuasive fascination with the origin of urbanism is better served by an inter-city than an intra-city scale. The coarser nature of evidence required for discussing urban systems and settlement patterns relieves some of the pressure on archaeological resources for more intensive mapping and excavation. Coincidentally, crude data is an adequate fit for purely quantitative empirical spatial analyses, whilst remaining relevant for addressing questions on why cities appear at certain locations and in specific relation to each other.

The relative placement and assessment of the importance of sites within settlement patterns have often been tackled by applying size-rankings and spatial pattern analyses (e.g. Kowalewski 1990, 2003; Falconer & Savage 1995; Savage 1997; Drennan & Peterson 2004; Algaze 2005; Smith 2005). Christaller’s (1933) economic ‘central place theory’ stays influential in the development of such supra-city quantitative analyses in archaeology. Wheatley (1972) anthologises research in central place theory when it was still very much in development. Contemporary urban research on the internal structure of metropolitan regions and multiple nuclei are related to the same family of economic urban thought. Central place theory in archaeology is currently influencing predictive modelling for settlement patterns (Vaughn & Crawford 2009; Fletcher 2008), which bears relevance to rank-size rule methods. Increasingly, history and archaeology are advancing along lines akin to relational geographical theory, knowledge and policy transfer, and network thinking (e.g. Newman & Thornley 2011; McCann & Ward 2011; Faulconbridge & Grubbauer 2015) to conceptualise regional and global urbanity and urban systems (e.g. Verbruggen 2007; Brughmans et al. 2012; Raja 2017; and globalisation more generally: Hodos 2017). In contrast, Smith

fundamental nature of my arguments, I will stress that this book is structured by a particular research purpose and therefore does not purport to offer a unifying theory that is adequate and practicable to serve the full breadth of urban research represented in this debate. By going back (in this chapter and Chapter 3) to how human being and human action may transform landscapes into cities my point of departure is not rooted in cities of the global North as a fait accompli (see Robinson & Roy’s (2016) critique), but will appeal to the essential universality of the ‘human condition’.
Towards Radical Comparative Urban Studies (2006) presents a concise overview of interpretive concepts and models that combine types of cities including several ways in which, including those artificial, cities are founded.

Quantitative approaches alone cannot appreciate the complexity of urban origins. Evidence of origins is indicative of much more diversity and plurality in the processes of urban emergence than Childe’s historically influential ‘revolution vocabulary’ (Greene 1999) suggests (Blanton 1982). Criteria for the definition and classification of urban settlement are problematic and, except for certain statistical studies, not necessarily informative (cf. Grove 1972; Smith 1972). Nonetheless, a rank-size based approach indicated that the view that Mesopotamian urbanism respects similar principles as dense western urban conventions might be in need of revision to accommodate the sheer variety of settlements (see Falconer & Savage 1995). Classificatory and quantitative approaches thus can aid the formulation of further questions and research.

Distinguishing city types and providing classifications results directly from the attempts to identify or disentangle the variables and characteristics that constitute a city. Indeed the definition of what a city constitutes has been a matter of debate for the better part of a century. One of the pivotal positions in this debate came from Louis Wirth (1938). He was the first to make apparent the lack of a sociological definition of a city. Introducing a sociological definition of the city would immediately take into account that urbanism is not confined to the city locus. He envisioned a definition relying on four characteristics: population size, density, heterogeneous individuals, and settlement permanence, which are still of relevance in much contemporary thought on this subject.

Categorical cities

Paul Wheatley (1972) categorised Wirth’s (1938) take on urbanism as a trait-complex approach, ‘converting a simple aggregate of features into an ideal type construct’ (Wheatley 1972: 608). He presents the reader with an overview of the types of strategies recognised within the elusive term ‘urbanism’, in fashion at the time. Trait-complex approaches exist next to: ideal-type constructs, which dichotomise urban society to non-urban counterparts such as the urban-rural divide; ecological theories of urban development, which posit urban society and social organisation as responses to pressures of the environment, broadly including measures of biological determinism and the origins of urbanism; cities as centres
of dominance, which view the role of the city as a power phenomenon, leading from the city as generator of effective space to Christaller’s economical central place theory, producing hierarchies within city regions; and expediential approaches, relying on definitions based on numerical size for classification. Wheatley (1972: 621–622) concludes that these types of strategy are not mutually exclusive:

Although the strategies are complementary [...] they are jointly directed towards four seemingly contradictory conceptions of urbanism in terms of (i) an interactional model which emphasizes the growth and structure of specialized networks of social, economic, and political relationships focused in cities; (ii) a normative model in which urbanism is viewed as a way of life. [...] (iii) an economic model, concerned primarily with productive activities in a spatial context; and (iv) a demographic model, which treats urban forms essentially as aggregations of population in restricted areas.

Classification is relevant because effectively it would be impossible to pinpoint the emergence of cities if it cannot be defined what a city is. This problem permeates the continuing discussions on the origins of urbanism. Outside archaeology Jacobs (1969) is often credited as the one to adopt the case of Çatalhöyük (southern Anatolia, Turkey) as the earliest city in the grand narratives devised to explain the emergence of urbanism. Although archaeologists cannot quite agree on whether Çatalhöyük can qualify as a city, town or village (Taylor 2012), simply on the basis of size, Fletcher (2010) sees reason enough to dismiss its potentially urban status. Emberling (2003) denies Çatalhöyük this status on the basis of a missing hinterland. Taylor (2012) adapts the disagreement in archaeology in his revamped progressive model of urbanism where the city comes first. So, Çatalhöyük becomes reputed for showing the first features, but not all traits of ‘city-ness’. As opposed to this functional placement, Soja (2010; also Blake 2002) still uses Çatalhöyük as an urban case study to support certain arguments around the progress and acceleration of innovation as part of the urban origin narrative.

Importantly, although the authors mentioned here acknowledge alternative urban traditions to differing degrees, this grand narrative approach seems counterproductive with regards to understanding the common formative processes of urbanisation. Meanwhile archaeologists seem to have become more pragmatic. From an infatuation with ideal type categorical typologies of differing cities (see Fox 1977; e.g. Sanders
Cowgill (2004) suggests replacing typologies with more flexible variables placed along axes or dimensions. Smith (2007, 2010a, 2010b), in turn, privileges a functional definition of the city (as in fulfilling urban functions), which then can be employed usefully in framing the case studies of others (e.g. Fernández-Götz & Krausse 2013). More recently Smith (2016) specified his functional definition approach by suggesting a polythetic set of attributes to determine the intensity of early urbanism instead. For contemporary cities Parr’s (2007) interrelated ‘spatial definitions’ display a similar concern with the social functions of the city as a physical entity (the built city, cf. Scott & Storper 2015), bringing consumptions of goods and service provision in connection with employment opportunities and requirements.

These categorical concerns are relevant because identifying urbanism and classifying places as cities have not only been problematic with regards to the earliest known cities. The overall futility of a single grand narrative is also exemplified by the debate on Maya urbanism. When Sanders & Webster (1988) cast doubt over the urban status of Maya cities – an opinion voiced earlier by Coe (1961) – they were criticised by Smith (1989) and Chase et al. (1990) for overgeneralising Mesoamerican urbanism as a whole, and failing to recognise the variability and complexity of urban functions and possibilities. Smith (1989; also McCafferty & Peuramaki-Brown 2007) points out that archaeological data in the region is too scant to make such all-encompassing statements, while with regards to Aztec settlements archaeological evidence becomes generally more productive when viewed as part of an urban tradition (see also M.E. Smith 2008).

Depending on the criteria one uses, Maya cities could be classified as urban, which is the way they were approached by many before anyway (e.g. Andrews 1975). Fortunately, Mayanists have since moved on, retaining the urban vocabulary (Grube 2000; Sharer & Traxler 2005; Joyce 2009) and leaving the debate behind. In the light of the recent discoveries of urbanised sprawl for a multitude of Maya cities (e.g. Chase et al. 2011a, 2011b, 2016; Golden et al. 2016; Hutson 2016), this corrective seems fully justified. It was conceded that such discussion is not necessarily helpful in the understanding of the nature of urbanism and how it functions as part of a societal structure, regardless of how state-like or urban that is (Graham 1999; McCafferty & Peuramaki-Brown 2007).

Acknowledging the urbanised nature of such settlements, the notion of ‘tropical urbanism’ has been suggested (Graham 1996, 1999). Alternatively the Maya tradition has been categorised as featuring a
‘low-density (agrarian)’ pattern of urbanism (Fletcher 2009, 2010, 2012; Peuramaki-Brown 2013). This is also applied to the ancient Khmer of Angkor Wat, whose culture, Coe (1961) equally asserted, does not feature cities. Arguably similar traditions existed in e.g. eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Africa (Smith 2011a; also Storey 2006). None of these are current urban settlement patterns. This does not withstand that agrarian and dispersed urban traditions thrived and were remarkably resilient over long periods (Fletcher 2010; Isendahl & Smith 2013).

Unfortunately, without an equivalent in today’s western and globalised paradigms of urban planning, these traditions have yet to receive the scholarly scrutiny they deserve. Meanwhile the extant categories used to characterise urbanism can only be flexibly applied (M.L. Smith 2003a; Cowgill 2004) and even then the ‘problem is that these categories are [...] insufficient, cross-culturally problematic, and too protean. Something more rigorous is needed to adequately define urbanism and incorporate low-density urbanism both in the industrial and in the agrarian worlds’ (Fletcher 2010: 252). Consequently, in 2016 I started a research network (Pre-Columbian Tropical Urban Life, TruLife) to explore interdisciplinary shared concerns and research potential between Maya cities and sustainable urban design, so that Maya cities may contribute to the global challenge of urbanisation. Furthermore, this book builds on an example of Maya urbanism demonstrating this very purpose and future potential.

It is clear that no agreed-upon resolution on early urbanism has been reached (see Smith 2016). Moreover, the debate on formulating a unifying and appropriate definition of the (early) city has continued (Smith 2003a; Fletcher 2010) and is being revived. The validity of several of the old concepts and models are being revisited (see Gaydarska 2016; Christoffersen 2016; Andersson 2016; Raja 2016) at the same time that contemporary urban studies have started questioning what a city is and why they exist (Scott & Storper 2015; Peck 2015; Mould 2016; Walker 2016; Robinson & Roy 2016; Storper & Scott 2016). In these debates, the ideas of Wirth and Childe remain catalytic beacons.

The cultural myopia on western urbanism – the direct historical relation with antiquity and Mesopotamia usually unquestioned (but see Wheatley 1969; Graham 1996) – has tainted the discussion on defining ‘the city’. This makes it difficult to study alternative urban traditions as part of a common human phenomenon. The ongoing debates demonstrate that when going beyond time-space specificity, the context of policy and administration, or any historically documented decrees that determine and ascribe city status and inhabitants’ civic rights, the picture
of what constitutes a city remains muddled. We can all concur with Fletcher (2010: 253) that: ‘The study of urbanism currently does not have an agreed basis for rigorous worldwide comparison.’ Ultimately all this suggests is that, when laying the foundation for comparative studies, no single (static) definition would result in an appropriately equal basis for selecting and studying cases. In contrast, the suggestion for a focus on how cities function as a process (cf. Graham 1999; also Christophersen 2015) is something to subscribe to when a deeper understanding of urban life and development as part of the inhabitation of landscape is sought.

**Comparative urbanism**

Fortunately, in both urban studies and archaeology, research overall has not been deterred by the disagreement over definitions. Each project either explicitly or implicitly chooses its own perspective, albeit generating broader understandings is hampered by the lack of appropriate and rigorous frames of reference (Yoffee 2009; Fletcher 2010; Smith 2012). Nevertheless, urbanism and ancient cities have received a lot of attention in archaeology during the past decade or so. A non-exhaustive representation of archaeological work on ancient cities without a single cultural emphasis can be found in seven recent volumes: Smith’s (M.L. 2003b) *The Social Construction of Ancient Cities*; Atkin & Rykwert’s (2005) *Structure and Meaning in Human Settlements*; Storey’s (2006) *Urbanism in the Pre-Industrial World*; Marcus & Sabloff’s (2008) *The Ancient City*; Gates’ (2011) *Ancient Cities*; Clark’s (2013) *Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*; and Creekmore & Fisher’s (2014) *Making Ancient Cities*.

Yoffee (2009) notes that several of these volumes do not go through the effort of critical synthesis nor do they all constructively live up to their intellectual foci. ‘[T]he cities portrayed in these volumes for the most part seem abstractions, lifeless, and unconcerned with the lived experience of citizens’ (Yoffee 2009: 282). While the latest volume certainly works towards rectifying this (e.g. Magnoni et al. 2014), this realisation is surprising. A further concern is that these volumes inadvertently assist in dichotomising the field of comparative urban studies by juxtaposing the ‘ancient’ or ‘pre-industrial’ city with ‘contemporary’ cities. Within this book no such distinction shall be made. Furthermore, despite the initial decontextualisation necessary for a comparative approach, emplaced lived experience (see Chapter 3) will be a significant component of my low-level interpretive approach (discussed below).
Yoffee (2009: 282) remarks that ‘any comparison of early cities with modern ones needs to be taken seriously. We can learn from our colleagues in historical archaeology [...] and in urban geography.’ Even though he upholds the view that ancient cities are predominantly not like modern cities, he reasons ‘comparison will lead us to explain why this is the case’. Vice versa, Smith (2012; also Smith 2010a; Isendahl & Smith 2013; Barthel & Isendahl 2013; Vis 2016) cogently argues why and how studies of ancient urbanism could be of relevance to urban studies today (see also Smith et al. 2012, on archaeology’s contribution to social science debates). So, what is considered to be a city today can serve as a basis for ancient-modern comparisons without presuming their differences and similarities or questioning and defining the exact nature of urbanism.

A preoccupation with ‘ancient cities’, or the equifinality of city origins and the nature of urbanism, risks obstructing and restricting comparative investigation into the functioning of cities and the processes from which cities emerge. Therefore, my aim is not to present yet another version of a grand narrative explaining the urban phenomenon in general. As Wheatley (1972: 602) put it: ‘it is not particularly profitable for a social scientist to attempt to discuss the nature, the essential quality, of urbanism. That is a metaphysical question more amenable to philosophical enquiry than to the empirical methods of the social sciences.’ Instead, I propose to accept that cities exist: not as a fait accompli, but in necessary relation to the general ongoing processes of humans settling and modifying the landscape. Cities are for living in and continue to be developed in that process of inhabitation. When inhabited, cities are always changing. There is no reason to distinguish a priori between types of cities or time periods, because the basic principles of how urban landscapes function as inhabited environments remain. Only from a position of understanding fundamental similarities can the specificities articulated by comparison become meaningful (sensu Scott & Storper 2015).

Yet, to contextualise my methodological agenda, it cannot be denied that clarity is desirable on how I regard the quality of urbanity of a place. The preceding literature-based discussion conveys that a methodological contribution can be achieved based on a rigorously conceptualised comparative frame of reference. The definition that determines urbanity as the quality of any place affords cities equifinality (i.e. the same developmental outcome reached through different trajectories). Yet, as comparative urban studies emphasise, the characteristics of each instance of this quality are pluriform. In other words, to compare rigorously, our understanding of basic principles must account for all imaginable diversity among end states which have attained the same (urban) quality. The
following working definition (cf. Smith 2007), which is based on the social practices of urban life, is intended to lend my comparative frame of reference this flexibility. Because it is not intended to be applied or tested as a classification measure, the test cases in this book demonstrating the methodological developments (see Chapter 7) are assumed to function accordingly.

**Social practice based definition of cities**

Highlighting social practice, my working definition is based on urban life, accepting that the ordinary existence of cities is a prerequisite for this.

A city is a contiguous locus positioned in the physical landscape, which has been developed for human inhabitation through social-environmental interaction, and is resided in to such extent that for a predominant number of the population there is no unavoidable need to leave its confines. All of everyday life’s necessities can be met through social relations, either directly or indirectly (i.e. using relations to agents and (resource) locations external to the contiguous locus’ confines), which can be found within its confines. The interactions of everyday life, in turn, are constitutive of, accommodated by and mediated by the environment. The environment has become physically transformed in such a way as to permit dedicated occupation by such social processes, which in themselves are also constant negotiations with their social and physical environment. This dynamic situation is expected to meet basic requirements for permanency within the locus’ confines on the level of human life.

There are a few things to note with regards to this process-oriented definition. First, it avoids identifying any specific traits *a priori*. That is, what is entailed by the necessities of everyday life is not prescribed. Nevertheless, it can be conceded that permanence must be delimited at the least by the requirements for survival.

Second, the aspects of the urban landscape that qualify as contiguity are not prescribed. This is dependent on the processes of everyday life, though it does require the features of the developed landscape to serve (unspecified) purposes within everyday life.

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4. Ley (2010) offers a preliminary attempt at a phenomenological systemic basis for a morphological definition of the city. The definition here departs from the process of inhabitation of which built form is an outcome (see Chapter 3 for theoretical grounding, and Chapter 6 for urban morphology).
Third, no claims are made towards thresholds of size and density or intensity. This is dependent on the population and the way the population developed the landscape for inhabitation.

Fourth, inhabitants are not made ‘urban prisoners’. That is, they may not have to leave to uphold their everyday functioning, but still can do so for other reasons. Vice versa, non-residents can enter and partake in the city. In this way structural yet autonomous placement within the wider landscape, including external relations, are ensured. In addition, the predominant proportion of residents cannot be reliant on direct external relations controlling subsistence, as is literally the case in prison complexes.

Fifth, any difference between urban-rural becomes a transitional and flexible distinction. It could be expected that beyond the city’s confines, people increasingly lead an everyday life in which they are not reliant on the relations within the city’s contiguously developed locus to provide. Simultaneously, this leaves open the possibility that the existence of cities ‘urbanises’ the whole landscape to some extent (see Blake 2002).

Sixth, the definition supposes a measure of social complexity that should be sufficient to allow everyday life for individuals to unfold within the locus’ confines by using all relations and interactions (including some that may be external) that take place there.

Seventh, this definition requires that cities are viewed as being contingent on the processes of inhabitation and development taking place accordingly. This means we must be aware of the distinction between studying cities as social phenomena and employing a purely empirical focus on the physical characteristics of cities. Archaeologists typically encounter cities as abandoned, derelict and disturbed developed loci. Empirical recording alone cannot comprehend the constituents of the city. Studying cities socially should entail studying urban life, and therefore rely on the assumption that all urban built environments are inhabited environments.

Eighth, this definition renders certain intensively developed loci non-urban when it cannot be established that everyday life could unfold within the city’s confines. This may include excesses of monumentality and (political or cosmological) planned idealism, which may display physical characteristics almost impossible to distinguish from the

5. In current large-scale urban consideration of planning for megacities and urban agriculture, the regionality of cities and the blurring of urban-rural distinctions, building on McGee’s desakota-model in Soja’s post-metropolitan era (see Kasper et al. 2015), is becoming an accepted and potentially productive view, especially for peri-urban development (see Simon & Adam-Bradford 2016). Here it is employed as a general perspective.
complex composite of places with ‘true urban life’. Indeed, a physically
developed environment may hold the potential to accommodate urban
life even though it has not taken place. Although, for their subsistence,
elaborate religious and palatial complexes may have relied on a hinter-
land, which is only developed to a lesser extent, these are examples of
monumentality rather than full-fledged cities.

Finally, however, the main admonition with this definition, and
what will restrict effective classification of any place, is the probable
impossibility to confirm with certainty that any developed landscape
could fulfil all requirements for everyday life to take place within
its confines. Furthermore, many places that are currently not com-
monly regarded or treated as cities may fulfil these requirements.
Contemporary multinuclear city-regions might hypothetically fulfil the
requirements as both separate cities and a single one. Consequently, this
definition provides the grounds for studying elaborate places of settle-
ment in their own right and on the basis of their intrinsic characteristics.
Conversely, it leaves open the question of which exact traits are unique
to cities as opposed to settlements that are not cities, and how these
might differ from society to society. Therefore, it becomes contingent
upon the comparative framing of research respecting this process-orien-
ted definition whether such questions can be answered in the future.

Ultimately, it is my premise that sociality is at work in spatial contexts
of cohabitation constructed by humans. Thus, whatever information we
use to study urbanism requires a social theoretical understanding. While
not exactly a ‘sociological’ definition (cf. Smith 2016), the notion of
developing an urban perspective based on ‘social practice’ is not without
precedent, as Joyce (2009: 192) exemplifies:

[S]ocial and political formations like ancient cities and polities
are instantiations of ongoing social relations simultaneously
embedded in and both producing and reproducing historical
traditions [...]. Rather than integrated and coherent, societies are
fragmented and contested to varying degrees such that there is
never complete closure to any system of social relations. Practices
and the cultural and material conditions that constitute landscapes

6. China is reported (Rapoza 2015; Jacobs 2016) to have planned and built huge urban areas that
nonetheless, to date, have never been occupied. They are intended to and hold the potential
to fully accommodate the processes of urban life in the future, but some may fail to achieve
this stage.
are always negotiations among differently positioned actors – socially embedded individuals and groups – distinguished by varying identities, interests, emotions, knowledge, outlooks, and dispositions. As locations characterized by a ‘greater concentration of social relationships’ (Southall 1983: 10), cities are places where these negotiations are perhaps most concentrated, intense, and unrelenting.

With these words Joyce similarly steers the study of urbanism according to Graham’s (1999) suggestion that it is more productive to shift interests from what a city is to how a city works.

A deeper theoretical grounding for my definition can be found in Pred’s (1984, 1986) conceptualisation of place as a historically contingent process. ‘Places are a kind of historical micro-geographies [sic], in which many individual territories interact and biographies collide. The crossings of behaviour and movement generate spatial transformations and localise structures. The historical construction of place involves the appropriation and transformation of space as well as the reproduction and transformation of society in time and space’ (Vis 2009: 75). Thus, in spatial-material terms, the city is merely an intensively developed place, which conditions the everyday life that is simultaneously responsible for its formation. A contextualisation based on process permits generating understandings of the dynamics and functioning of places. Many of the static categories necessary to classify a variety of city types are contingent upon these processes.

Ancient-to-modern comparisons are most useful for how they can elucidate the ways in which places functioned and have been developed whilst being constitutive effects of social life themselves. Cities and their structures are emergent from the social-environmental interactions of locally residing urban life. Such social practice based perspective can exist next to other explanations of urban existence. Following Joyce (2009) these include: (1) cultural evolution: based on a model of linear progression typically assuming a relation to complex social organisation; (2) functional: including the many city types following from a main functional characterisation, e.g. political, religious, regal-ritual, administrative, and mercantile (see Fox 1977), but also the city-state (e.g. Hansen 2000) as opposed to cities in territorial states (Trigger 2003); (3) elitist: an authoritative power drives the settlement, e.g. the concepts of synoikism7 (see Blake 2002), where an authority may force

7. Also known as synoeism or sinecism.
relocation so an amalgamation of residency develops as a single urban unit (for an example see Bakirtzis 2003); (4) action theoretical: a catalytic and/or innovation based explanation; (5) environmental: emergence of settlements based on natural factors and resilience (see Trigger 1972). Seeing urbanism as social practice actually underlies all of these explanations for city foundation or urban development without predetermination. In the end, all urban landscapes are caused by a common societal process.

What to study comparatively

The notion of the ‘inhabited urban built environment’ opened this chapter. The urban context of the present work is now explained. This notion simultaneously incorporates the logical object of study or the information source for a broadly comparative methodology in urban studies: the built environment, due to its physical endurance and ubiquity (Harris & Smith 2011). Despite a variety of views on comparative urbanism in urban studies over the years (e.g. Robinson 2004; Dear 2005; Nijman 2007; Ward 2010), it is important to note that urban geography (like urban sociology) has become more concerned with society as taking place in the context of the city than the life of the city itself (Zimmermann 2012). In no small part this is the influence of the Lefebvrian (Lefebvre 1991) proposition to view space as socially produced and imagined.

Ward (2010) shows that comparative urbanism has been around in various guises, notably with quantitative beginnings using the city as a pre-given bounded locality, for several decades. Recently it has shifted towards fashionable socially produced and relational strands of social theoretical thought. In so doing, cities are not themselves the object of study. The focus has become fixed on the socio-culturally contextualised activities that take place within it. These activities are part of much more fluid and transient, far-reaching, social structures. The implication of this is that comparative urbanism is currently not well-equipped to elucidate how cities function in their own right (cf. Yoffee’s (2009) remark on the lack of lived experience in archaeological urban work). For example, in

9. Chapter 3 presents a conceptualisation of the causal processes in human and social life leading to the generic construction of inhabited (urban) built environments.
Robinson’s (2004) work cities become cogwheels in a global postcolonial narrative (see Clarke 2012), while in Dear’s (2005) work urban life and city-regions receive their meaning from specific socio-political and cultural contexts. Instead, the low-level interpretive approach that I pursue in the remainder of this chapter makes use of empirical information on each (physical) city itself. This information remains decontextualised from specific social implications to empower comparative understanding beyond segregative particularities.

Recently, German urban sociologists in particular have proposed to refocus research on the city itself, without letting it become immediately subsumed by cultural contexts – as is the case in current social research on cities (see Löw 2013). Their approach is based on what they call the Eigenlogik (intrinsic logic) of cities (Zimmermann 2012; Löw 2013) and seeks to redress social urban research to regard the city-specific characteristics. It propagates, in tandem with architectural sociology or anthropology (Delitz unpublished), the pursuit of a sociology of the city rather than a sociology in the city (Zimmermann 2012; also: Löw 2008). Architectural anthropologist Yaneva (2012: 4) states:

> The danger is that when we talk about different cities (Cardiff, Sydney, Paris, London), different social contexts and different urban cultures, we tend to describe local treatments of the universal. Too often we assume that cities have common features such as infrastructure, markets, transport networks and city authorities. Culture is taken as a variable that is relative and situated.

Whereas early adoptions of the Eigenlogik perspective (Löw 2013) seem to focus on a city-specific cultural history with a minor role for the particular material properties of the spaces that compose the place, architectural anthropology repositions that interest.

Delitz (unpublished) proposes a scheme of major architectural properties by which to broadly characterise cities. Material properties, or the actual substance of cities, are part of the Eigenlogik of cities. However, relational, imagined and contextual approaches to urban research tend to overlook this substance as a ubiquitously present, yet uniquely formed, object of study. Griffiths (2013) notes that the same is happening in the humanities. Unsurprisingly, the spatial turn in history (e.g. Arnade et al. 2002) is influenced by the same socially constructivist thought – e.g. Briggs (2004) places cities as part of historically specific larger designs for society. Yet, approaching cities as social practice in space, sensu society-space.
relations (Griffiths 2013) and emplaced inhabitation (cf. Ingold 2008a; Howes 2005a, see Chapter 3), has much to gain from direct engagement with what places were physically really like for the inhabitants. The physical shapes composing ‘the urban built environment’ complex embody a cogent comparative source of information on the functioning of particular cities, because practice is an inherent part of their presence and significance.

This argument positions research on an intra-city and individual inhabitant scale, requiring quite intricate details on the way space has been built up. While this may be relatively easy to achieve for contemporary cities, further back in time (archaeologically) it is a challenge to retrieve a similar level of data. Where urban historical research can often roughly distinguish which sectors of a city were developed when, further evidence is typically scant and piecemeal. This results in area or zonal maps, the resolution of which is too coarse to enable discussions on the experience of the inhabitants (e.g. Historic Towns Atlas series (Lobel 1969; Speet 1982); Conzen 1960). Increasingly, there are mathematical and agent-based-modelling approaches that seek to express the evolution of the intrinsic shape of cities in law-like formulas (e.g. Batty & Longley 1994; Bettencourt 2013; Longley & Batty 2003; see Sayer 1979 for a modelling critique), which are argued to incorporate social factors in formalisations. Though such methods may both steer investigations and inform planning through isolating abstracted factors in city development comparatively, they are far removed from comprehensively addressing the human experience of inhabitation or understanding the opportunities for social interaction and development.

The open-endedness and complexity of real social systems and processes, as emphasised in complexity theory (Bentley & Maschner 2003, 2009a), suggests that such models and formulas will never be able to fully account for how processes take place in the real world. Yet, the critical application of modelling makes an interesting specialist research tool. It should be acknowledged that actual understanding in social science is subjectively limited to one’s own frame of reference. Inter-subjective understanding even restricts direct linguistic communication (vs. Zierhofer 2002; cf. Vis 2009: 105–7). Learning processes and emplaced experience, such as geographically delimited inhabitation and acculturation, may converge individuals’ biographies and enable improvements in inter-subjective understandings. Nonetheless, uniquely positioned and situated individuals (cf. Hägerstrand 1975, 1976; Pred 1977, 1981; Thrift & Pred 1981; Vis 2010) cannot achieve an equal understanding for immediate exchange.
The same rational actions and the same language are likely to mean slightly different things and be intended slightly differently. ‘[I]t cannot [...] be safely assumed that the words a community uses to refer to the actions are a sufficient description of what is happening, or why. Nor can we assume that the social actions that are concurrent with a material assemblage are necessarily compatible with it’ (Fletcher 2004: 111). Similarly, the understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of intent and outcome will inherently differ between individuals, even if the individuals can be said to generally adhere to an overarching scheme. This intrinsic individualism alone gives social processes openness and therefore the flexibility to change at the hand of individual (inter)actions with the social and physical environment. Moreover, it stringently confines the potential for comprehensive explanation to historically and culturally specified contexts.

Even with detailed contextual knowledge it applies that ‘similarities between individual plans, building forms and decorative elements do not necessarily imply that they have the same meaning. [...] ‘Comparable shapes and plans can easily be considered representations of different realities’ (Mekking 2009: 35). Given this individuality and arbitrariness of the ‘meaning’ of intentional acts and communication – be that cultural, ideological, cosmological, religious, political or other – it is surprising that built form and architectural styles and traits have readily sparked research and interpretation on exactly that level.

Even when this kind of meaning and intention underlie the decision to build space in a particular way, the primary effects of its physical occurrence take place on a more fundamental level of experience and potentiality, notwithstanding its presumed meaning. With regards to style, architect and Mayanist Andrews (1975: 32) asserted:

[I]t can be argued that style is a secondary indicator of cultural tradition, since the larger Maya area appears to be fairly homogeneous when more basic factors are considered. Style as such has very little to do with determining the physical organization and spatial order of the centre as a whole and can be thought of as a superficial overlay which is subject to change at will [...].

10. Rational actors should not be confused with conforming to normative rules. Decisions to act are ordinarily reached (see Von Mises 1998; Vis 2010) – one prefers to do something rather than something else with the expectation that it will improve one’s position and situation. It is not prescribed that any action will have the intended effect nor can it be generally prescribed what is considered to be an improvement. Rational actions are subjective and may therefore seem irrational to other individuals.
Rather than first considering the basic (common) causal effects of spatial-material construction to structure a particular complex – which has immediate implications for restricting and enabling opportunities of encounters, interactions, and framing the outcomes of interactions – archaeologists and anthropologists tend to be seduced by their ability to order and organise according to (visual) traits and decorative patterns. Interpretation in these cases is often aided by coarse analogies with other (not spatial-material) data which operate on high levels of particular specificity, instead of comparative information.

**Representation and meaning**

Representational thinking for interpretation as relevant to specific contexts is both favoured and well-explained by Mekking (2009: 25).

Transversal thinking always and everywhere enables anybody to relate people, events and other aspects of life, irrespective of their being causally related or not. [...] Because building is an identifying act of positioning oneself in public space, the mental horizon of the patron-builder will inevitably be part of a worldview, a religion, a political ideology, or even the marketing strategy of a multinational. [...] If we focus on the built environment, this means that someone orders an urban structure [...] according to a chosen tradition, which represents, by its formal and material aspects, precisely those things one would like to have others understand as being characteristic for oneself or for one’s living conditions. What can be concluded from all this is that the logic of representation obviously requires a direct comparison between products, like buildings or architectural designs [...].

The use of comparison in this quote is suggestive of a learning process. This appears concurrent with constitutive phenomenology (Schütz 1967) and can be replicated in interpretive research. Nevertheless, Mekking (2009: 44) also claims that ‘never before [globalisation] has it been so difficult to understand the built environment without using a comparative analysis. The signalled, alarming lack of knowledge about the different cultural traditions that architecture forms a part of, has made a meaningful analysis of the built environment as such all the more urgent.’

The analytical challenge of comparison alluded to here regards the ‘discrete’ separation and identification of cultures and societies (rather
than comparing urban built environments per se). This then echoes Dear’s (2005: 247) statement, concerning the conceptual conflicts between the specificity of a place and generalising understandings, that ‘Everyone knows that comparative urbanism is difficult.’ To his credit, Mekking (2009: 33–34) is mindful of the counterproductive effects of periodisation in historical comparisons as it obstructs dynamic temporality. ‘Since it consists of sheer projection and has nothing to do with historical analysis as such, one should never use it.’ In contrast, Robinson’s (2004) design for comparative urban research focuses around a specific historical period. This has the logical consequence that rather than learning about cities, we learn about societies taking place in cities around that time. However, whether culturally or historically specified, it is generally neglected that the complications with comparisons might result from the highly specific contextual frames of reference that are used without question (cf. Scott & Storper 2015). According to Mekking (2009), to interpret representative reality one has to know the specific social group who built the architecture, their background and ambitions. Their preferred specific forms and materials relate to the function and architectural product they realise. In other words, his interpretive analysis becomes framed within the symbolism and meaning of shape and material, rather than what its *material presence* implies in terms of social interaction (see Chapter 2) and thus the practices of inhabitation and development.

Clearly, Mekking’s analytical resolution on the basis of culturally embedded architectural traditions operates on the shape itself. This is a rather different premise than to analyse the structuring properties of shape within the inhabited built environment as advocated here. Comparative or generalising understandings of the historic context in which cities occur and, arguably, according to which entire cities are shaped can be beneficial. However, I argue that understanding cities as a phenomenon occurring within a common, fundamentally human, process of settling, would lay a strong rudimentary foundation upon which such contingent specific meaning could be better understood. Any traits conveying messages and communication inextricably cohere with how shapes structure and accommodate inhabitation first. As Kropf (2011: 398) recognises: ‘First and foremost, it is our habitat. The built environment is an essential part of day-to-day life.’

It can be agreed that ‘a person who is busy creating a dwelling place, uses his or her coordinates and body parts to structure, to proportion, and to orientate this structure[, which is] how people make a meaningful place out of their structure. It is meaningful because one’s
own body is the bearer of what any place in time means to each builder and inhabitant’ (Mekking 2009: 36). Consequently, the researcher is provided with a conceptual framework with which schemata of meaning in the shape of architectural complexes can be uncovered comparatively. However, Mekking’s three clusters (anthropomorphic, physiomorphic, sociomorphic) that form the basic meaningful stratum of built environments forego the solid causal psychological theory to truly substantiate such a proposal on a generic human level.

The archaeological proclivity to focus on architectural traditions and (building) typologies to interpret the built environments of cities, often constructing speculative analogies about the potential symbolic meaning being communicated, assumes, sensu Mekking (2009: 26), that ‘expressing something about one’s identity is always the goal of ordering or creating an artefact’. Rather than always being the intention of creating and ordering, it is an inescapable truth that, just like any human action, creating and ordering are expressive of identity. This principle, however, explains the readiness in archaeology to ascribe meaning to the ordering of places (see examples in Zedeño & Bowser 2009; Bowser & Zedeño 2009). Furthermore, using symbolism (influenced by Eliade) in the explanation of physical city characteristics has long been a mainstay of comparative urban discourse, as initiated by Wheatley (1969: 9). ‘[C]osmo-magical symbolism [...] informed the ideal-type traditional city in both the Old and New Worlds, which brought it into being, sustained it, and was imprinted on its physiognomy.’ For example, in the Maya area the patterns of urban planning have tentatively been interpreted as ‘cosmogrammes’ (Ashmore & Sabloff 2002, 2003; Špracj 2009). Although my proposition is not to reduce urban built environment comparisons to environmental determinism, neither can the high-level interpretation of contingent culture-specific expression readily support comparative work.

Environmental determinism

To compare built environments, I suggest there is a more rudimentary or essential social significance to the inhabitation of urban built environments than the contingency or arbitrariness of cultural and contrived communication schemes. One would be forgiven for thinking this alludes to a reduction to law-like determinism following either social or environmental models. Such sensu stricto functionalist perspectives would test explanatory hypotheses instead of leading to (inter)subjective understandings of inhabiting urban built environments.
This does not withstand that the local geography, topography, climate, material physics, availability of resources and other natural factors will – as society comes to learn about its requirements for inhabiting that environment successfully, sustainably (initially meeting necessities for biological survival) and comfortably – increasingly determine certain aspects of urban form. Moreover, the state of technological knowledge and advancement will enable and restrict physical construction and modification in particular ways. So clearly, neither social practice nor meaningful contexts in isolation or combined will fully determine urban built form. There are physical and environmental limitations determining the (im)possibilities of material construction to how and which features can be built and shaped (see also Chapter 2 on ‘the material’). In other words, there always is a certain level of environmental determinism at play in the processes of urban settling and developing the landscape.

Kropf (1996) acknowledges that natural features and geographical location are of importance in the constitution of the physical properties of how urban form determines the character of a town. After all, anyone visiting a town or looking at their plans will recognise the enormous influence natural features have on its general layout, feel and functioning (investigable by comparative positivist measures). Conzen (1968) argues that it is important to include contour lines in town plans, which is common practice in archaeological mapping, because natural features may result in ‘inherited outlines’ (i.e. persisting shapes) in the pre-urban layout of a developing place. It is essential to realise, however, that despite the influence environmental determinism will exert on the shape of the urban built environment, its social practice opportunities are dependent on the basic properties of the material and spatial configuration constructed as a result. This configuration will incorporate any adaptations to natural topography or other (im)possibilities posed by (bio)physics.

As a consequence, no matter the restrictions imposed by environmental determinism, the specific configuration of the built environment is necessarily socially significant. Any built environment is the product of constitutive human and social interactions. Moreover, Deligne alerts us to the risk of overestimating the restricting influence of the natural environment in the development of cities and new towns (PhD thesis 2003, cited in Taverne 2008: 184). It is thus suggested that building according to will, in whatever way man pleases, is quite resourceful and resilient. This supports the view that all built form is emergent from and constitutive of the social (see Chapter 2 on ‘the social’).
Even if due to environmental factors there are true impossibilities imposed on e.g. the orientation, location or specific composition of any built feature, the spatial results of dealing with that are socially constitutive all the same. The features that are eventually built and the environmental features that are eventually incorporated are still part of a socially significant built environment with a view to accommodate (restrict and enable) social (inter)actions as a contiguous locus. As soon as anything is built it becomes a social reality within the inhabited (urban) built environment. Building is immediately a social act and therefore any shape resulting from it is instantaneously a social reality. The social significance of the basic properties of the material and spatial configuration of an urban built environment can therefore always be studied without having to consider the exact nature (influence) of the environmental determinism at play, although a full narrative explaining the development of a place (a city history as described by Rutte 2008) would be expected to take this into account.

Low-level meaning (avoiding conflation)

Now we can return to the kind of interpretive analysis implied by the process-oriented and social practice perspective within the definition of cities as urban life presented earlier. I have just argued that within environmental determinism and the biological sustenance of its inhabitants, i.e. pure (rational) functionalism, the effects of designing and shaping one’s environment are nonetheless socially significant. Furthermore, I have exposed the problems arising from launching comparative research from highly specific contextual perspectives. It is paramount that all building affects how the landscape is experienced and is conducive to subsequent interactions within it. In material records of the built environment (in the archaeological sense) we have a record of performed actions, but no direct means to access the psyche\footnote{Although it is possible that psychological functioning eventually is the primary determinant of spatial and social behaviour, the individual circumstances that lead to decisions could still not be fully known and taken into account. Psychology limits insights to individual cases and situations, while a social perspective can assume the constitutive relevance of individualism in decision-making processes, but is able to assess and appreciate the complex of outcomes within socio-spatial contexts. In the words of Merton (1936: 896): ‘Psychological considerations of the source or origin of motives, though they are undoubtedly important for a more complete understanding of the mechanisms involved in the development of unexpected consequences of conduct, will thus be ignored.’} and the contingency of cultural understandings. Yet, the reality of the existence
of intentions and socio-culturally specific backgrounds cannot be denied. Indeed, this existence necessarily plays a role in the decisions to act and to appropriate a landscape for inhabitation. Such contextual approaches represent a distinct level of investigation. These contexts are contingent on the opportunities created by the more basic spatial-material structuring of the life-world within which the conditions (determining the flexibility of the foundations) for the emergence of the imaginative productions of space (see Lefebvre 1991) and representational traditions are accommodated.

The comparative interpretive objective of this research is therefore positioned between vulgar empiricism or law-like functionalism (based on assumed objective measures) and representational meaning. It looks for the constitutive implications of material presence on inhabiting a landscape that is being developed according to human design. This interpretive focus roughly corresponds to what has been called ‘low-level meaning’ in Rapoport’s (1988, 1990) work on the built environment. This level mainly conveys recursive human-environment relationships (Smith 2007). In addition, here this level intends to incorporate the experiential knowledge such interactive practices acquire. The way material presence conditions opportunities to develop a ‘sense of place’ (cf. Tuan 1977; Pred 1986), and an inhabited identity as subsequently introduced in place formation, are always included implicitly. Experiential knowledge and the ‘sense of place’ better correspond to Rapoport’s ‘middle-level meaning’. Finally, ‘high-level meaning’ refers primarily to cosmovision and the supernatural. It should be noted that representational meaning, as promoted in Mekking’s (2009) work, and indeed regularly seen in archaeological interpretations of urban planning and architecture (e.g. Ashmore & Sabloff 2002, 2003; Atkin & Rykwert 2005; Šprajc 2009; critique: M.E. Smith 2003), concentrates on middle- and high-level meaning. Importantly, the specificities of power, communication and ideology placed in the realm of ‘middle-level meaning’ are subject to such research. As Smith (2007) reflects, except for a slowly increasing engagement with techniques that are primarily empiricist in nature, especially some types of spatial analysis originating in other disciplines (see Fisher 2009; Cutting 2003, for adaptations of architectural built environment methods), low-level meaning has received little attention in studies on ancient urbanism or long-term comparisons.

A potential caveat in Rapoport’s (1988, 1990) levels of meaning is its predominant focus on design and planning, since it does not discuss what the spaces created by built form are actually used for. It could be argued that the use of space, in a utilitarian sense of particular functions, is part of
the response to and intentions for space within the three levels of meaning. Alternatively, we turn to Mekking’s (2009: 24) discussions on what the built environment represents once again to understand how this is also intrinsically different and rather elusive on the level of space and shape.

[N]ew functions are initially always represented by architectural shapes which were not explicitly designed for it. [...] Referring to the functional side of architecture is nothing more than mentioning just another reality represented by the medium. Trying to discriminate between building types on the grounds of their functional aspect means using the term ‘building type’ in an improper way, since all architectural typology is exclusively based on formal aspects. In some cases, the function of a specific group of buildings and its (formal) typology seem to match so perfectly that one would be tempted to see it as a ‘natural’ and ‘unavoidable’ combination.

This sharp statement brings us to realise a significant difference in the type of information we are presented with. Our responses to and contextual understandings of the shape of built form do not necessarily also prescribe how it was used, since there are many utilitarian opportunities enabled by the same spatial-material framing of interaction opportunities (see also Fletcher 2004; Sayer 2000; Chapter 2 will develop this notion of ‘spatial independence’ further). Yaneva (2012) argues similarly that too often cities are assumed to have common utility features within differing cultural contexts. What actually occurred in specific spaces is only accessible through other types of information. Such information is different from the basic material and spatial properties of the complex composite that a built environment’s configuration offers researchers. Mekking’s ‘formal aspects’ of architecture articulate this difference, which incidentally concurs distinctions made by Rapoport (1990). It should be repeated, however, that material properties to do with style or adornment, which may provide clues on use, are not included in this research, because they are essentially secondary aspects of constructing a spatial composition (see Andrews 1975).

Spatial composition has a constitutive structuring role of which Batty (2009: 194) recently said: ‘Currently there is considerable confusion about the way that the physical structure relates to human behaviour.’ Mekking (2009: 41) explicates just such a fundamental role of built space: ‘All over the world and for ages now, people have found their own ways to distinguish between “them” and “us”. In architectural
terms, it mainly means erecting walls to include “those who belong to us” and exclude “those who do not belong to us”. This role of *seclusion as a primary operative* for conceptualising the built environment will be elaborated on in Chapters 4 and 5. It forms the tenet of unifying a way to discuss spatial organisation (cf. Rapoport 1994). Separating use from a fundamental structuring role not only clarifies the information we are after, it also increases comparability across datasets. This especially applies to working with mapped representations of original empirical data, which is important for accomplishing comparative interpretation.

Placing a non-utilitarian limitation on interpretation will help explicate how the interpretive objectives are commensurate with the empirical information employed in research. Lynch (1981) noted that using commonplace (often cultural) terms for architectural objects leads to conflation in understanding. He uses the example of a church to demonstrate that a church is at once an architectural template and a function. The word church may be associated with the particular building, once built with the intention of fulfilling religious expectations, and taking on a predetermined socio-cultural role. However, the way it frames interaction socio-spatially – a ‘socially positioned spatiality’ in its built environment context (see Vis 2009) – permits wider possibilities. In order to clear up the confusion signalled by Batty (2009) we need to carefully disentangle which information allows for interpretive claims on which level. Disentangling our information source so it fits the interpretive aims may prevent the conflation caused by the uncritical use of commonplace and lay terms (see Chapter 2, especially Sayer 1985). Disentangling effectively means devising conceptualisations that are able to account for the breadth of diversity of the human settling practices under scrutiny, here comprising all urban traditions. Establishing an appropriate level of interpretation will facilitate spatial practice analysis of society-space relations constitutive of cities through cross-cultural and diachronic comparisons (see Griffiths 2013). When applied broadly this can yield profound understandings of differences and similarities in patterns and processes.

Yet, conflation is not only confined to the cultural embedding and scope of the interpreter. The framing of the objectives of research can also cause research outcomes that are themselves conflated or at least confused. When Wheatley (1972) identified the fashionable approaches to urbanism (discussed above), he also noted how these appeared to concur exactly with Tilly’s (1967) categorisation...
of contradictory conceptions of urbanisation. Where Tilly comments on the lack of attempts to define urbanisation as a process, Wheatley condemns the lack of attention to urbanity as an overarching context or phenomenon. In the absence of clarity on and the uncritical use of terms like urbanism and urbanisation researchers had included too much in their concepts (Tilly 1967). The resultant research perspectives inhibit the development of comparative urban studies (Wheatley 1972). Rutte (2008) demonstrates that urban historians have been particularly prone to be unselective in their research objectives. Unselectiveness often leads to indiscriminative totalising explanatory narratives (see also Diederiks & Laan 1976; e.g. Speet 2006) in which inadvertently various aspects of urban life and the city itself are neglected or overlooked. Consequently it becomes difficult to connect interpretive claims to relevant information sources. ‘Purposive conflation’ as found in urban history has had similar effects on urban morphological accounts of cities (see Kropf 2009).

Research practice

An interpretive approach based on low-level meaning is intended to prevent these kinds of conflation. One is required to understand the information source, must identify the commensurate interpretive scope, and institute appropriate conceptualisation. For that reason investigation can neither start from the objectification of analytical empiricism as contrasted against and discussed through conceptual frameworks, nor can it start from uncritical culturally embedded empiricism using conflated (commonplace) terms to frame research.

However, overcoming this requires a process of knowledge production which allows the empirical record on the basic material and spatial properties of built environment configurations to speak for itself. Our interpretation cannot rely on elusive high-level representational contexts or positivist measurements awaiting contingent meaningful ordering. Both have undeniable uses for the construction of the full narrative of the life and development of cities, but here I make the conscious choice to limit my approach to comparative urbanism to a social practice perspective.

While in archaeology the empirical, functional and representational interpretive paradigms seemingly have been going hand in hand, they do so somewhat unawares. On the one hand this may be due to purposive conflation, possibly resulting from other urban disciplinary
influences. On the other hand, this is due to a lack of intra-city and wide coverage datasets on ancient cities appropriate for comparison. There is no justification for comparative urban geographical discourse to ignore the data that archaeology has been assembling on cities all over the world for decades (Smith 2009b). Yet, we should acknowledge that only in the last decade technological advancements and traditional long-term field mapping projects are producing datasets at such resolutions that everyday urban life and development can be studied properly (see e.g. Evans et al. 2007; Marcus & Sabloff 2008; Hutson et al. 2008; Sinclair et al. 2010; Chase et al. 2011a; Arnauld et al. 2012). The diversity on display in tropical cities now is huge and ever increasing. This emphasises the enormous potential for broadening and contextualising our contemporary knowledge of urbanisation and urban life.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is in archaeological discourse that appeals are made for developing systematic and rigorous comparative frames of reference with direct relevance to social scientific issues. Here attempts emerge to come up with methodologies with wide comparative merit to the built environment on various scales (e.g. Smith 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b; York et al. 2011; Stanley et al. 2012, 2015; Isendahl & Smith 2013; Dennehy et al. 2016). Currently comparative analytical tools and measures are predominantly adopted from other disciplines, such as architecture and geography (see selected examples in Chapter 6). Alternatively comparison is driven by juxtaposing an increasing number of urban cases – i.e. exclusively empirically informed comparison. Regardless, current discourse shows that we can overcome previous obstructions caused by archaeology’s meticulous and particularist empirical research processes. No longer are we detracted from formulating the frameworks, questions and perspectives to guide the analysis of these datasets beyond crude quantitative variables on small selections. Archaeology can now stretch research to city-wide (recent attempts e.g. Magnoni et al. 2012; Richards-Rissetto 2012; Hare & Masson 2012; Richards-Rissetto & Landau 2014) and comparative scales (e.g. York et al. 2011; Stanley et al. 2015; Dennehy et al. 2016).

Hägerstrand (1976: 332) gave us an insightful view on the importance of everyday individual lives in relation to understanding case studies of bounded wholes, here cities. These wholes display a complex of togetherness in occurring features across time and space.

Actually what is at stake here is not in the first place the understanding of unique areas of the world but a deeper insight into the principles of togetherness where-ever [sic] it occurs. But these
principles, as I see it, can only be derived from a careful study of actual individual cases. Such cases need not be of any particular scale, but [...] I believe that the small settings – say the daily range of people – is of crucial importance to look into for revealing insights that can later be applied to wider areas. More important than the spatial scale is the treatment of process. Togetherness is not just resting together. It is also movement and encounter.

Against this background quantitative analytical tools should be used in an exploratory and directly interpretive way for individual cases, which due to their formal nature can later be used for systematic comparisons. This requires a basis of careful theorisation of data (Chapter 4) as well as human phenomena (Chapter 3). The influx of theoretical criticism in Geographical Information System (GIS) science (Leszczynski 2009; Kwan & Schwanen 2009) is leading to an increasingly balanced conduct of hypothesising and exploring landscape perception in GIS applications (Wheatley & Gillings 2000), aimed at generating e.g. human sensory (e.g. Llobera 2003; Paliou & Knight 2013; Smith & Cochrane 2011), affordance and phenomenological (Gillings 2012; McEwan & Millican 2012), and socio-political (Lemonnier 2012; Kosiba & Bauer 2013) understandings. In this book I work towards quantitative GIS tools and consider appropriately defined comparative measures. The practice of this is discussed in Chapters 7–9.

Exciting possibilities are emerging. The perspective sketched in this chapter is in desperate need of a method especially devised as appropriate for the resultant comparative interpretive objective. This cannot forego a commensurate social theory, as suggested by Yoffee (2009), but will at least need to satisfy Smith’s (2011b) empirical theoretical requirements to be applicable at all. Neither should the methodology follow any particular disciplinary discourse, possibly finding its home most comfortably in the inherently interdisciplinary space of urban studies. After all, the aim is to stop thinking about cities and in cities, but start thinking on cities and engaging with cities as they occur to us and are developed through inhabitation (cf. Zimmermann’s (2012) and Löw’s (2012) aforementioned Eigenlogik). The material and spatial information contained in the built environment is both the most enduring and ubiquitous source available to us to start this comparative pursuit. The first focus of comparative understanding (low-level interpretation) available to the researcher refers to the occurrence and presence of built environments in the urban life-world. That is, how its emergence from, existence within, and accommodation of social
practice is significant to societal structuring and development. The omnipresence of the material reality of built environments as a constitutive part of social practice merits further attention, whether its shape is partially or primarily driven by either measurable environmental, functional or communicable ideational factors. My aim is to enable research in the remit of comparative urbanism determined by Nijman (2007: 1), which is to develop ‘knowledge, understanding, and generalization at a level between what is true of all cities and what is true of one city at a given point in time. [...] Comparative urbanism [...] is the systematic study of similarity and difference among cities or urban processes.’

The potency, cogency, reliability and relevance of a new method for radical comparisons all depend on a foundational philosophy of science which is capable of providing the basis for both theory building and an appropriate epistemology. This is the topic of the following chapter, which appropriates a critical realist view for the conceptual purpose of creating knowledge about the world.