

The Urbanism of Thomas Sharp¹

Paper for the 12th International Conference of Planning History

**New Delhi
10-15 December 2006**

Draft Paper - Not for publication or citation without the permission of the author

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1. Introduction

This paper sets out some of the principal planning ideas of Thomas Sharp (1901-1978) a prominent figure in planning in the UK in the middle part of the twentieth century. From working class origins Sharp was one of the first planners trained as such, rather than entering planning via another profession. He established his name in the early 1930s through a series of polemical texts, starting with *Town and Countryside* (Sharp 1932). He partly wrote this whilst unemployed, which is indicative of the troubled relationships he often had with those with whom he worked and his habitual response of resigning in such cases. Subsequently he worked as an academic, was seconded to central government for part of the Second World War and became a consultant. In this latter capacity he was probably the most prolific of authors of reconstruction plans during the mid-late 1940s (Larkham and Lilley 2001), with something of a specialisation in historic towns such as Durham, Oxford and Exeter. He was also President of the Town Planning Institute in 1945 and subsequently of the Landscape Institute in 1949. With a shift to local authority planning after the introduction of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, combined with his obduracy, meant that his later career, in the 1950s and 1960s, was quiet compared with the peak, and rather frenzied, years of the 1940s.

¹ This paper forms part of a project *Town and Townscape: The Work and Life of Thomas Sharp*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

In very simple terms Sharp can be summed up as an urbanist. Like many of his generation, his views were in part a reaction against the industrial and urban horrors of the nineteenth century. However, he was equally critical of what he regarded as romantic responses and was in the vanguard of a critique of garden city principles. He sought a rediscovery of a civilised urbanism that would be distinctly modern in character and was influential in then evolving ideas about the appearance of place, and the idea of townscape. A short paper such as this can only focus on a few key ideas. Also it cannot fully reflect how those ideas evolved over time. This paper principally focuses upon the two decades when Sharp when he was prominent in the profession; the 1930s and 1940s.

The paper draws from Sharp's published works and from the archive of his personal papers held as a Special Collection at Newcastle University (GB186 THS). It is very much work in progress; further work is needed on Sharp and, in particular, in contextualising his ideas in the wider planning milieu of the period.

2. Key concepts

a. *The Modern Town*

Sharp initially laid out his principal ideas about planning and settlement form in his first book *Town and Countryside* (Sharp, 1932). The core principles remained through his subsequent 'general books', *English Panorama* (Sharp 1936), *Town Planning* (Sharp 1940) and substantially revised 2nd edition of *English Panorama* (Sharp 1950) (with some interesting shifts and changes of nuance from the first edition).

Sharp set out his stall early in *Town and Countryside*. In part his argument stemmed from the wider concerns of the period over the perceived desecration of the countryside as motor traffic allowed the ugliness hitherto largely associated and confined to the industrial town to spill out into rural areas. However, for Sharp, the problems of the future of the countryside were inextricably linked with the future of the town. Urban areas had lost urbanity, according to Sharp, because of Victorian industrialism and capitalism but also because of the planning response of garden cities and their suburban progeny;

'Tradition has broken down. Taste is utterly debased. There is no enlightened guidance or correction from authority. The town, long since degraded, is now being annihilated by a flabby, shoddy, romantic nature-worship. That romantic nature-worship is destroying also the object of its adoration, the countryside. Both are being destroyed. The one age-long certainty, the antithesis of town and country, is already breaking down. Two diametrically opposed, dramatically contrasting, inevitable types of beauty are being displaced by one drab, revolting neutrality. Rural influences neutralize the town. Urban influences neutralize the country. In a few years all will be neutrality. The strong, masculine virility of the town; the softer beauty, the richness, the fruitfulness of that mother of men the countryside, will be debased into one sterile, hermaphroditic beastliness' (p11).

He went on to directly savage Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. The essence of the argument was that the correct response to the horrors of the Victorian city should have been ideas about how to improve it rather than abandon it. He mocked Howard's preoccupation with town 'evils' such as gin palaces. He lambasted the concept of Howard's idea of marriage

of town and country as 'Town-Country' as being 'a hermaphrodite; sterile, imbecile, a monster; abhorrent and loathsome to the Nature which he worships' (p143). He lamented how garden city low density ideas had been encapsulated in planning legislation and in the profession. Howard was assaulted perhaps to an even greater degree in *English Panorama*; in describing the Three Magnets he stated 'It was on pseudo-philosophical foundations like this that the New Jerusalems were builded. The acceptance of such romanticism may perhaps be regarded as an indication of the desperate condition to which sociologists had been reduced...' (p 78-79). The incorporation of garden city ideas in planning orthodoxies led to 'universal suburbia', as development wasn't restricted to new contained settlements but sprawled across the countryside, 'vague, wasteful, formless, incoherent, it slobbers over the counties' (p 86). *Town Planning* continued the assault on garden cities (now labelled 'Neither-Town-Nor-Country') and suburbanisation.

At the heart of Sharp's critique of the garden city movement and its influence on planning standards of the time was the issue of density (and how this was architecturally articulated). In *Town Planning* he assaulted what he regarded as fallacious standards of housing density and distance between properties (with the then prevalent norms of twelve houses per acre and seventy foot between fronts and backs of parallel houses). He restricted himself from making conclusive statements about population density but suggested that in the order of 150/200 people per acre might be appropriate versus the less than 50 in garden cities and the 400 suggested by Le Corbusier in *Ville Radieuse*. The task of the planner was to rehabilitate the idea of the town. He was careful to distinguish between himself and other commentators on the state of the English town, such as D H Lawrence, by establishing that poor town building was not an intrinsically English failing and indeed for Sharp there was a distinguished post-Enlightenment, pre-Victorian history of town building. This history was related to practical democratic utility rather than authoritarian show (as might be found on the Continent). London squares exemplified this. Similarly English (and some Scottish) provincial towns were compared favourably to other European countries, as pleasant towns for citizens (though as Sharp made clear, historically not all citizens benefited).

However, though Sharp's appreciation of urbanity was rooted in the past he was at heart a modernist. These historical examples were inspiring but not for imitation. In *Town Planning* he reviewed various theorists of urban form. He started with the linear city as proposed by Arturo Sona y Mata in Spain and Soviet variants. Sharp dismissed this concept on a variety of grounds, not least its inefficiency in its stimulus; in claiming to be 'Planning for a Transport Age'. He then considered ideas put forward to reformulate the big city. Though not named as such, he clearly had the MARS plan for London in mind with an old centre retained but the rest of the city rebuilt in a modified linear way, with substantial wedges of country between the urban blocks. Again Sharp was ultimately dismissive, over the desirability of having such big cities and the massive extent of such a renewed London; so this was 'not only a wild dream but rather a bad one' (p 64). Next he turned to urban hierarchies with satellite towns, a model he found more appealing and in principle more practical. This acknowledged that whilst big cities were problematic they had social attractions and might form part of a wider hierarchy in what Sharp sought to define as 'subcentralisation' (vs. decentralisation). In considering what an ideal size for a town might be, he concluded with a guess that it might generally be around 100,000 with the occasional larger city.

b. *Town Design*

Sharp's published views on Le Corbusier were somewhat equivocal. In *Town and Countryside* he referred to 'the much-discussed frenzied theatricality that Le Corbusier has entitled "The City of Tomorrow"' (p140). In his discussion of theorists in *Town Planning* he displayed some sympathy for Corbusian ideas but considered them impractical. He was not especially adverse to high rise flats at this point and concluded the appropriate residential mix would be a combination of flats and houses. However, from the time of *English Panorama* on Sharp had pronounced, drawing inspiration from Georgian precedents, that the key urban building block should be the street. His advocacy for the street was used also to attack semi-detached, hip-roofed, 'open' development.

In *Town Planning* he analysed why the later nineteenth century street was a debased architectural form before making the case for why the terraced street remained his preferred form of urban design, providing the best picturesque (not quaint) architectural composition. As he had in *Town and Countryside* earlier, Sharp cited Trystan Edward's *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture* as a key influence on his ideas on these issues; at the level of the individual house stress was placed upon emphasising doorways as an expression of the individual house. Sharp outlined compositional principles for terraces which might avoid the monotony of the nineteenth century street. Each individual street should be regarded as an architectural composition and a town should be a continuous series of contrasting compositions. With an urban hierarchy some principal streets might be quite long and given modest monumentality but most would be short and might be in cul-de-sacs. Above all the key was held to be variety.

Similarly the partially completed draft manual, *Civic Design*, (Sharp 1942) prepared for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in a discussion on the street opened with the bald statement that 'the axiom that the street is the urban unit of design' (p29). At the core of this was the importance of good neighbourliness between buildings; 'each street must be judged, and should so be designed, as a large-scale finite composition, a single urban picture' (p29). Monotony could be avoided by keeping streets relatively short and having variety between streets. Formal architectural 'stops' were not deemed necessary but there was considered to be a danger of anti-climax if compositional issues were not fully considered. The manual further considered issues relating to domestic streets and commercial streets. The latter included a blast against 'chain-store architecture', the practice of using standardised designs for particular companies, considering it 'a most deplorable abrogation of civic responsibility' (p37). Effectively this was recognition of what we now term 'local distinctiveness'; 'Each town differs from every other town, every site from every other site and every individual problem of design requires its own individual solution' (p37).

This consideration of the street was part of a wider approach to urban design that Sharp was formulating which he came to call townscape, a term which was of course also used by a group of writers at the *Architectural Review*, leading to Gordon Cullen's (1961) seminal text. An antecedent for a townscape approach is today usually taken to be the work of Camillo Sitte. However, Sharp's own published references to Sitte were not kind. In *Town and Countryside* he wrote,

'Camillo Sitte saw in picturesque 'natural' medieval towns a beauty that he could not find in later architectural uniformity. He set out directly to copy in modern cities the irregularities, the fumbings, the purposeless staggerings of those old towns. Where

the old builders did not plan at all he planned an imitation of their lack of planning - with such lamentable results that the whole of his theory stood condemned by his works within a few years. Of all artificiality the most barren and depressing is the conscious imitation of the unconscious and "natural" (p66).

In the early 1930s Sharp had a strong preference for the building and towns of the Enlightenment period. This was perhaps ironic given that many of his subsequent prestigious commissions as a planning consultant in the 1940s were for older medieval settlements. However, these made him more appreciative of their qualities as a comparison between the two editions of *English Panorama* shows (Lilley 1999). In the latter he did not disavow his previous analysis of the disorder of the medieval town but was now willing to celebrate its picturesque effects and also concede that the pictorial possibilities of some major sites were consciously and deliberately exploited. And certainly the detailed appraisals he had undertaken of the cities he worked upon had a major influence on his ideas about townscape.

This was evident in his first major plan produced as a consultant, undertaken for Durham, *Cathedral City* (Sharp 1945). For example, the oblique approach to the Cathedral from the town up a narrow medieval street was described as follows,

‘[Owengate] climbs steeply up to Palace Green, with a glimpse of the Cathedral at its head. Then, at the top of the rise, at the head of the curve, the confined view having thus far excited one’s feelings of mystery and expectation, the street suddenly opens out into Palace Green, broad, spacious, elevated, with a wide expanse of sky: and there, suddenly, dramatically, the whole fine length of the Cathedral is displayed to the immediate view. It is as exciting a piece of town planning as occurs anywhere in the kingdom’ (p54).

Thus, the Owengate approach to the Cathedral was not an accidental piece of townscape charm, but given further validation as a consciously planned composition.

It was in his Oxford plan, *Oxford Replanned* (Sharp 1948), though, where his ideas about townscape crystallised. The plan contained a Frontispiece and Tailpiece which effectively set out principles and components of townscape, using Oxford as an example. Together these sections totalled some 65 pages of analysis. He analysed the magnificent; Sharp considered the High Street a 'great and homogenous work of art' (p20), not due to the intrinsic quality of the buildings but because of the relationships between them. Nearby, the sequence of Bodleian Library, Radcliffe Camera and St. Mary's church was held to be 'a first class aesthetic experience... to be treated with awe' (p32). He considered that crucial to both these experiences was the experience of movement through space or, as he termed it, kinetic experience, one his fundamental townscape principles. Another can be considered to be an aversion to monumentality and 'opening out', honed by his work in historic cities with their intricate visual effects. This stands in contrast, to for example, other reconstruction plans of the era such as York (Adshead, Minter et al. 1948) and Chester (Greenwood 1945). His exposition of townscape also encompassed much more humble elements. For example, under the heading of 'trivia' he considered the importance of floorscape, demonstrating the significance of texture, and its erosion through tarmac².

² However, in *Chronicles of Failure* (Sharp c.1973) Sharp stated that some of the text in Frontispiece and Tailpiece was introduced anonymously by H. de Croning Hastings.

His ideas on townscape were subsequently reprised and developed in *Oxford Observed* (Sharp 1952), and in his last significant work *Town and Townscape* (Sharp 1968).

c. *The Organisation of the Town*

Though Sharp is perhaps now best known for his ideas on the visual appearance of place he was also greatly concerned with the functionality and social and economic organisation of place. He was also angry about the social and economic conditions that prevailed in significant parts of the country. His *A Derelict Area* (Sharp 1935) was a bitter treatise on the depressed coal mining area he had grown up in south-west Durham and he considered himself a life-long socialist (e.g. letter GB186 THS).

These attitudes informed his planning principles. His first major foray into the Town Planning Institute was through a paper presented in 1937 entitled *Segregation in Town Development* (Sharp 1937). The paper was a critique of over-segregation. His particular target was the large-scale separation of social classes in housing provision, or 'snob-zoning', which he considered socially undesirable. Planning, such as it was, he held to reinforce this process through its approach to density. The delivery of this paper was a traumatic experience; nearly all the speakers in the following discussion were highly critical, some defending the practice of social segregation. *Town Planning* subsequently picked up this theme. Again, Sharp was very critical of the social segregation of the contemporary city and the attendant class snobbery, the more so as he saw planning reinforcing the separation of the social classes.

As part of the creation of satellite towns, Sharp was an advocate of the neighbourhood unit. In *Chronicles of Failure* (Sharp c. 1973) he takes some credit for the development of the idea of the neighbourhood unit although more usually it is associated with evolving ideas in the USA in the 1920s (see, for example, Madanipour 1992). He did set out ideas for something akin to the neighbourhood unit in the first edition of *English Panorama*; the smallest unit he identified was such as might exist around a crèche, a number of which might aggregate to support a health centre or primary school. The neighbourhood unit was clearly advocated in *Civic Design*, it is 'the residential unit which allows for convenient social contacts and which can provide a full range of social, cultural and technical services of a local character' (p52) and was considered to be something like 2,000 inhabitants (though Sharp soon modified this figure – for example his Durham plan referred to 6,000 to 10,000). It was considered advantageous to have each of the units between principal traffic roads with the functional centre somewhere towards the geographical centre. Again, the use of neighbourhood units was advocated by the Study Group of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning credited with introducing the neighbourhood unit into British planning (Stephenson, edited by DeMarco 1992), led by Sharp, in their report appended to the main Dudley Report, *Design of Dwellings* (Central Housing Advisory Committee 1944). This sort of thinking became generally accepted in the planning of the first generation New Towns.

Another example of Sharp's challenge to orthodox thinking on grouping of activities was his attitude to civic centres. The idea of a grouped 'civic centre' was very popular in reconstruction plans, following Edwardian antecedents. No longer was a town hall considered sufficient, it needed to be accompanied by a range of other administrative and cultural facilities which might include, for example, colleges, libraries, museums and art galleries. Sharp stood more or less apart in this fashion. Indeed he had criticised the concept before the war in *English Panorama*. He directly attacked the concept again in *Oxford Replanned* and

there is distaste for the idea expressed in the more official language of *Civic Design*. In essence he considered they were advocated out of a misguided wish for monumental display. Whilst acknowledging some groupings made functional sense, in his plans he was generally advocating a dispersal of facilities in a town and city as a functionally and aesthetically superior solution. In Larkham's work on civic centres four of the five plans he identified as rejecting the idea of such a centre were by Sharp and only one Sharp plan, for Stockport, appeared in the much longer list whereby such centres were advocated (Larkham 2004).

d. *Urban Roads*

The problem of managing the massive growth of motor traffic in existing settlements was to prove to be one of the defining features of Sharp's career from the 1940s on. In particular, following his reconstruction plans for Durham and Oxford he remained embroiled in the issue of how to relieve central area traffic in these cities for many years subsequently.

Sharp's approach to this key planning problem was quite distinct and different from the prevailing model evolving in the wake of the well-known recommendations of (Tripp 1942), which generally led to a tight inner-ring road with a series of precincts internal to this (though Sharp did adopt this model when applied to new development such as neighbourhood units). In *Civic Design* Sharp criticised standardised solutions not derived from proper analysis of the individual place. Like Tripp he had a general preference for roundabouts for traffic junctions though suggested that in towns they should generally be rectangular. Pedestrians should be separated in such locations by means of subways, for technical (smaller difference in height levels than bridges) and aesthetic reasons (less intrusive).

Based on consideration of his reconstruction plans Buchanan considered Sharp's approach as sufficiently significantly different to warrant a section in his seminal text *Mixed Blessing* (Buchanan 1958). Buchanan noted these plans generally did not have inner ring-roads as such and that Sharp (correctly) concluded that much urban traffic was internally generated and therefore could not be removed by bypasses and ring-roads. Sharp used the term 'substitute road' for his approach. A substitute road was a road inserted close to the main congested streets (which might be commercial or shopping) and designed to relieve the principal street of all its traffic except that directly needing to be there. Buchanan wrote 'Reading his reports now, one is impressed by his unerring eye for the choice of substitute road locations, and saddened by the way his proposals have been whittled away in the course of years of discussion' (p166). However, Sharp was not a pioneer of pedestrianisation, except perhaps for particular narrow historic streets. Indeed, he viewed a certain amount of traffic as representing the bustle and liveliness one would expect from a town centre.

e. *The Nature of Planning*

Though outside the main frame of this paper, it is worth briefly commenting upon Sharp's attitude towards the organisation and process of planning. In this regard, as so many others, Sharp's prominence was as a critic. A strong critic of the weak inter-war legislation his most public returns into the profession's eye were through assaults on the process of planning in the late-1950s and mid-1960s. A passionate believer in planning, in *Town Planning* he made some suggestions of how a planning system should work. At the heart of the process would be a National Plan prepared by a Central Planning Commission of experts. This would provide a framework for Regional Commissions and so on down to the level of local authorities. Elsewhere he spoke in favour of the nationalisation of land. An undoubted

technocratic Sharp nevertheless took the issue of public participation seriously. Indeed this was the major theme of his Presidential address, at a time when participation issues were not foremost in the profession's concerns (Sharp 1945). Sharp did not believe in public *engagement* in the process as such but did believe in the rights of the public to know what was being planned for them, to have the right to comment upon those proposals and if necessary to reject them. For Sharp planning was fundamentally concerned with design, a point he forcibly made to the Schuster examination of the qualifications of planners (Schuster 1950). Schuster concluded that planning is primarily a social and economic activity.

3. Towns that never were³

The post-war period was one era when planners can have been truly said to have designed towns in Britain, with the new towns programme and in some bomb-damaged towns, such as Coventry, substantial areas of planned development. This, however, was an area in which Sharp was to remain frustrated. Though his various reconstruction plans had varying degrees of influence it is perhaps only with bomb-damaged Exeter (Sharp 1946) that a significant part of an existing town was built in part along the lines proposed by Sharp. In terms of new settlements he was the initial master-planner of the first generation new town of Crawley before a characteristic falling-out led him to resign his position. Perhaps his most complete realisation of his ideas for a town was the hypothetical design he did which was featured in the film *When We Build Again*. He was also commissioned by the Forestry Commission to design a series of villages in Northumberland (although only three of these were built in part) and later in his career there were also plans for other new settlements; though neither of these are considered in this paper.

The plan and model he prepared for the Bournville Trust's *When We Build Again*, and exhibited in 1943, was for a small town, effectively not much bigger than concepts of the time for the appropriate size of a neighbourhood unit. A hypothetical scheme, but apparently based on a real site in the north of England, it was designed for a population of 8-10,000. The original intention was to represent a town of 50,000 people but that proved impractical for making a transportable model which was to be exhibited around the country.

A major factor immediately apparent in the plan of this satellite town was transport (*plan ref*). It was arranged either side of a railway, with an industrial area on one side and the remainder of the town on the other. There was a national highway nearby, separated from the town by playing fields. From this highway ran an arterial road, though again this did not link directly with the town. Rather, local roads ran off this into the main part of the town and the industrial area. This had the affect that there was no direct vehicular linkage between the industrial area and the rest of the town (though there was pedestrian access).

The primary local road in the major part of the centre ran through the centre. The centre itself was arranged fairly formally with a principal axis with shops on either side of this street. It was terminated at one end by a town square (off axis), with a community centre, church and cinema. At the other end of the axis was a roundabout and beyond, on axis, a 12 storey block of flats. Typically, though, the major of the housing was shown as being terraced, running in long-linked rows with semi-formal patterns of straight lines and curves. At the front, houses

³ This section draws significantly from material in the Thomas Sharp archive at Newcastle University (GB186 THS). Full references will be added as cataloguing proceeds.

were often set around small green squares, lying in the middle of local distributor roads. Most local streets were shown as through streets with only the very occasional use of cul-de-sacs. In some places terraces backed on to linear green space, before another road and another terrace. The densities of the terraces were up to 24 houses/ acre (net). In addition to the one point block previously indicated, there was also provision of some three storey flats and, at the periphery, some detached houses. Also to be found at the periphery were the major schools, allotment gardens and so on.

Sharp's approach with this hypothetical new town can be seen replicated in some respects with his outline masterplan for Crawley, presented in early 1947 (*plan ref*). Initially employed to define a boundary for the proposed new town Sharp sought to use some of the principles he had previously developed. So, for example, at Crawley the initial idea had been for the new town to be developed either side of the main north-south London-Brighton railway but Sharp argued for keeping the town west of the railway whilst locating the major industrial area to the east (with the purpose of excluding industrial road traffic from the town) (letter and report Sharp to Silkin 6/8/46 *refs*).

Crawley was by no means a virgin site. As well as the small town of Crawley it encompassed another settlement, Three Bridges, plus a sprawl of development in the countryside. Consolidating this sprawl seems to have been one reason for its choice as a site. Curiously for someone generally looking to increase urban densities compared to his peers Sharp recommended a larger land-take than the norm that had been established for new towns (suggesting 4,677 acres rather than 4,200 acres), explaining this on the basis of land wastage arising from existing development. Sharp's report (report March 1947 *ref*) indicated the existing Crawley High Street as one of its principal town centre axes, regarded as having character due to some good buildings but 'mainly due to the directness and simplicity of the broad street, with its green strips, and the island shopping site at the crown of the rising ground' (p2). To this he added a major east-west axis, running from near the north of the High Street. In terms of traffic, Sharp described it as a 'distributed centre', with little or no cross-town traffic but with good accessibility, making the centre free from congestion but lively 'as a town centre should be' (p7).

The rest of the new town was laid out on fairly conventional principles of first generation new towns. Six neighbourhood units and two sub-units were proposed, with the main units housing 6-10,000 people. The design of these were intended to create places self-contained for daily use, to save children under eleven crossing main traffic roads, to encourage neighbourliness and a local civic sense, to be a reasonable scale for providing local community buildings and, in effect, create a series of villages which coalesced to a sum greater than the parts as a town (Explanatory memorandum 1/2/47, *ref*). Densities in neighbourhoods were higher in those nearest the town centre. Open spaces between neighbourhoods linked to provide easy access to the countryside and utilised natural features, such as streams. The road network was described by Sharp as a 'roughly radial-and-circular system', with some in 'parkway' form. Thus, overall Sharp's outline plan for Crawley was not radically different from the principles prevailing with first generation new towns (Madanipour 1992) with only the pushing of industry to the periphery and his approach to the town centre being slightly unusual. However, it should be emphasised we only have an outline plan; we do not know how Sharp would have translated this into detailed proposals.

The Chairman of the new Town Corporation, Sir Thomas Bennett, an architect seems to have been very 'hands-on' in approach. The *Architect and Building News* (23/1/48) reported the

essence of the dispute being Sharp's refusal to provide for a monumental town centre. Sharp confirmed this in *Chronicles of Failure* (Sharp c.1973) referring to Bennett's distaste for his 'organic' layout in preference for something more formal. Eventually Bennett's interference came to a head and Sharp resigned. Sharp was replaced by Anthony Minoprio. His outline masterplan did not deviate enormously from that of Sharp. The town centre was somewhat reconfigured (though no great monumentality was evident) but seems to have a more conventional precinct approach, encircled by an inner ring-road. The purity of the separation of the primary industrial area to the east of the railway was diluted by dragging it partly to the west. The road network proposed was similar and though the configuration of neighbourhoods differed in detail they were not radically different in conception.

Sharp made a brief comment on the first generation new towns in the second edition of *English Panorama*,

'the first plans for these new towns are still clouded with garden-city suburbanism: and future building in similar places, and in all old towns, will need to be more compact and more truly urban than these first new ventures are at present planned to be' (p 109).

4. The Urbanism of Thomas Sharp

Even more than the rest of this paper, this section represents work in progress.

a. As appraised by others

The memory of Sharp in the planning profession, when remembered at all, is often for the trouble he caused, for example in the Town Planning Institute as it sought to redefine the nature of planning and the profession (see e.g. Cherry 1974). Yet it is clear that his contemporaries and near-contemporaries often held at least aspects of his work in very high regard (see e.g. Stephenson, 1992), something evident in many of the reviews of his publications at the time. Equally he was known and regarded outside the confines of the planning profession; for example, a letter from John Betjeman (*insert date & reference*) was gushing in its praise for *Oxford Observed* a view also held by the architect George Pace who cited it as a masterwork (Pace 1961/62).

This brief summary concentrates, however, upon specific and extended appraisals that have been made, mostly from the early 1980s, relatively soon after his death in 1978. The most authoritative work on Sharp is by Kathy Stansfield, initially in her MPhil thesis (Stansfield 1974) and subsequently in a book chapter (Stansfield 1981). In summarising Sharp Stansfield celebrated his qualities to inspire us that the town can be beautiful, the countryside should be defended and bad planning challenged.

After Sharp's death his widow provided funds for a biannual memorial lecture at Newcastle University that continues still. The first two of these by Lewis Keeble and Gordon Cherry directly addressed Sharp and his achievements. Keeble (1981) was enthusiastic in his evaluation. For example,

'He established... the idea that there are places in which buildings should happen and other, very much larger areas in which it should not happen at all. I am not certain that

his predominant contribution to the prevalence of this view or to the astonishing success it has met is now fully understood.

He revived and re-established the idea that the street, whether in town or village, is the proper unit of design rather than the individual building.

He wrote much of the now generally accepted grammar of planning, especially in relation to residential neighbourhoods, though it is now virtually impossible to identify and detach his particular personal ideas from a general ferment of thought in the perhaps uniquely creative time for planning of the 1940s.' (p14 and 15).

Cherry's evaluation was perhaps rather more equivocal (Cherry 1983). He did state that Sharp 'stands as a seminal figure of the mid century' (p1) and that 'for particular reasons, Sharp takes his place amongst the greats' (p17). But on substantive issues Cherry tended to regard Sharp a failure (as he did himself, Sharp c. 1973) or misguided,

'First, on his conviction that country is country and town is town, we have to say that his views could not prevail....'

'Next, in respect of his view of planning and townscape, Sharp saw cities as physical artefacts; people came second.... Concepts of townscape and urban form, and the practice of environmental design, are not today major features in planning. Again, Sharp stood for things which have slipped away as the century has progressed.'

'Finally on the nature of planning itself, the single, unitary, elite profession which Sharp advocated was an impossibility.... Sharp can be presented as a tragic figure, standing impossibly resolute against things destined to come to pass, representing views increasingly rejected by his generation and finally holding onto a wrong vision of his profession. In so many things seemingly he was uncompromising, but finally wrong.' (p15-17)

Cherry went on to say,

'But in the same breath we bounce back and say he was wonderfully, gloriously wrong.... The quality of the built environment does matter; the unique qualities of the British countryside are something for special protection; the directness and unambiguity of a planning system, underpinned as it should be by clear political will, is important; and our profession does demand our care and support.' (p17)

Some of Cherry's assertions are questionable (for example, though Sharp focused on place he cared deeply about people) and time lends a different perspective on others to which we will return below.

b. a preliminary evaluation

As Cherry so aptly put it Sharp was a man 'who dared to be different'. He was original and rigorous and not someone who would uncritically adopt prevailing conventional wisdoms. Some of his ideas and arguments became, for a time at least, part of the mainstream, others had less impact. Of course though he was important in developing various ideas he was (despite his sometime protestations to the contrary) generally not completely alone. Decoding

exactly who was responsible for the germination and development of some of the concepts discussed here is beyond the scope of this paper but it is posited that Sharp was at least one of the people important in their development.

Fundamental to Sharp's impact on planning debate in the 1930s was his critique of garden city ideology, a daring assault on deeply embedded planning conventions of the time. He was certainly one of the first in the planning world to launch such a direct assault. Less contentious was his disdain for their suburban progeny, sprawling out from existing towns and cities at a rapid rate. Underpinning these views was a strong belief in the urban and the urbane and its distinction from the rural. His view of modern urbanism, with its emphasis upon the street, though, was in marked contrast with the fractures of urban form promoted by the architectural Modern Movement as exemplified by Le Corbusier. Esher (1981) credited Sharp, along with Trystan Edwards, as one of the few arguing for such urbanity in the 1930s, but said that he 'spoiled his case by naughtily picking on Welwyn as his suburban bestiary' (p28).

In the short term his ideas on urban form were more influential in the management of existing historic towns; through the analyses he undertook in his reconstruction plans and his influence on emergent ideas of townscape. He brought a sensitivity and understanding to the rich complexity of historic towns than was common in the period, both in terms of their appearance and also, perhaps to a lesser degree, in the way they functioned. Planning and design at the time were still often rather stuck with a grandiose monumentality. He also brought a distinctive approach to the overwhelming issue facing historic cities at the time, provision for the motorcar, which if somewhat romantic about the impact of new roads (Pendlebury 2004), was always thoroughly thought through and non-formulaic. His ideas about historic towns formed part of developing thinking that was, in due course, to prove influential on the developing conservation movement in the 1960s and 1970s (though Sharp was anything but a militant conservationist!).

Sharp's approach to the design of new urban form in the 1940s was less distinctive than his handling of existing places, though whether this is in part due to orthodoxy catching him up is debateable. His preference for satellite towns was conventional by the mid-1940s at least and was exemplified in the New Towns. They used the neighbourhood model that he supported and had at least some role in introducing into British planning. Indeed, his model of a hypothetical new settlement and his initial plan for Crawley show no marked divergence from the norms of the time. However, it is regrettable perhaps that we do not know how Sharp's vision of Crawley would have evolved. It may have been more 'urban' than its contemporaries, which Sharp found clouded with 'garden city suburbanism'. Indeed, one of the shifts with the second generation New Towns was an attempt to make them more urban in feel (Madanipour, 1992).

c. Relevance today

Cherry's evaluation of Sharp concluded that many of his strongly held beliefs had come to naught. Yet much has changed since 1983. Certainly in some respects Sharp would have no truck with prevailing values. He (like most of his time) was a modernist and a technocrat, believing in expert knowledge, albeit tempered by a public right to challenge what was proposed. He would have struggled with post-modern uncertainties and 'relational' perspectives. But in other ways his views seem fresh and contemporary. Since Cherry's analysis the importance of design as part of a process of satisfactory urban planning has re-

emerged through American New Urbanism and a greater design focus in British planning. His ideas about the need for a contemporary modern urban form (based around the street), well designed without overly contrived 'showiness', seem as relevant as ever, if as elusive to achieve, as major urban expansion occurs in the south-east of England and as all over the country towns and cities continue to develop and evolve. We perhaps also need reminding of his belief of planning for all, not just those who can traditionally afford good design.

Finally something not so far discussed in this paper, but hopefully evident in the quotations made from Sharp's writings, is that he was a brilliant communicator. Holford reportedly said that Sharp was the only planner who could be read as literature (Horsbrugh, pers comm) and Keeble (1981; p14) said he 'wrote lovely, dense, concise English in a way which has never been excelled in writing about planning'. His ability with words helped make a deep impression on his contemporaries, albeit his maverick nature means he is now less well remembered than some of his peers. And he brought the subject of town planning to a much wider audience, with *Town Planning* often cited as the best selling text on the subject of all time. Planning and urban design needs, but rarely produces, men and women who can so forcefully and clearly argue for the need for good planning and design.

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