

# Contents

Acknowledgements	5
I. Introduction: Culture-specific Urban Structures Analyses	9
II. Methodology	17
1. Epistemological perspective – complexity	19
2. Space, place and body	22
3. Situation and <i>habitus</i>	27
4. Culture as an everyday experience, culture and the built environment	28
5. Meaning	30
6. Spatial order	37
7. Perception – aesthetics	40
8. Cues	42
9. Rhythms	51
10. Geometrical description – urban design perspective	54
III. Comparative analysis of neighbourhoods inhabited by Jews in pre-war central Poland	65
1. Case study – presentation of the sources	67
2. Thesis and methodological assumptions	70
3. Development of Jewish culture in central Poland – classification scheme	76
IV. The development of Jewish settlements through ages	97
1. From the eleventh century – to the end of the fifteenth century	99
2. Sixteenth century – until the Partitions of Poland	107
3. Partitions of Poland	125
4. The interwar period	183
V. Neighbourhoods inhabited by Jews in pre-war central Poland – three typological levels	189
1. Method of analysis	191
2. The regional level	195
3. The town level	200
4. The neighbourhood structure	201
VI Case studies	205
1. Łódź (Lodz)	221
2. Brzeziny	223
3. Góra Kalwaria (Ger)	288
4. Otwock	303
	319

VII. Conclusions	341
1. Complexity	346
2. Neighbourhoods – main features	349
3. Spatial order and meaning	354
4. Proxemics	362
5. Enclosure, geometrical analyses	364
6. Transformations	367
7. Final remarks	368
References	370
List of Figures	394
List of Tables	399

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# I. Introduction: Culture-specific Urban Structures Analyses

In his book in which he undertakes the challenging task of looking for the origins of a good literature in its basic component – the sentence, Fish (2011) starts with a motto from the poem ‘Permanently’ by Kenneth Koch:

*‘One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.  
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty.  
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.  
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence.’*

This popular metaphor, which invokes a picture of a city to illustrate the process of writing, may be used to show the common belief that urban structure may be read. As, like writing, the built form conveys information and meaning. This book attempts to explain this phenomenon. Its intention is to show how to read the urban structure and also, in a more normative sense, to provide a set of tools enabling the conscious creation of the built environment that conveys meaning and represents a certain spatial order. In other words, the main objective of the current study is to provide the assumptions to the ontology of urban space with regard to its cultural background.

The built form is often said to be an artefact of the cultures and societies that created it (Lefebvre 1991, Rossi 1984). Those who seek to explain how spatial practices are embodied in urban forms, a subject which philosophers have pondered since Aristotle, must venture into research from several disciplines. Anthropologists, environmental psychologists, urban morphologists and urban designers have all tried to define how various cultural conditions influence the shaping of the built environment. In order to understand human impact on an environment, we need

to grasp the variety of cultural patterns and examine their relations with the built environment at a given time.

Until now, many scientists, in disciplines as varied as philosophy (Lefebvre 2003), architecture (Rapoport 2003), and even sociobiology (Wilson 1998), have called for the creation of a single field of urban studies that could clear up the current misunderstandings and help in resolving how it is that cultural factors influence the creation of urban environments and, additionally, how the evolving environments affect human behaviour. However, to date, an explanation is still lacking. The fragmentation and specialisation of science, as well as historically established divisions, result in huge discrepancies in terminology and the language used by researchers from various backgrounds. What is more, because of the piecemeal structure of ongoing discoveries within specialised disciplines, scholars often do not realise the requirements of such studies.

What makes the situation even more challenging is the contemporary process of globalisation. Before the current era, when most people who lived in a city were part of the culture of that city and place, the task of the urban designer was to work with the '*genius loci*', the specific set of features of urban structures which convey the atmosphere of the place. Now, as globalisation displaces large numbers of people and brings them together in rapidly changing urban spaces, there is an urgent need to discover how an urban environment works in relation to the former, current and also future culture of usage of space. The context that has so far served as the primary source of knowledge about the culture of usage of space no longer suffices in the period of rapidly progressing urbanisation and migrations of large groups of people, who bring their own habits and behaviours. The need to design places that answer actual human needs is becoming progressively more urgent. This new requirement, to adjust the form of physical structures to the needs of their future users, results in a call for a more explicit normative theory which could support creators in their efforts to make places more human.

In recent years, a new field of research, complexity science, has come forth with new insights that may provide a milieu for the desired consilience. Thanks to this emerging field, new light has been shed on some of the problems which exist, especially on the margins of social and technical fields (Portugali 2006), namely the relations between everyday life and usage of space. The cultural background, the way people representing various groups perform activities specific to them on a daily basis, yields an understanding of the settings they tend to create, the overall schema inscribing into the more general framework of the cultural structures, as defined much earlier in the field of anthropology by Lévi-Strauss (1963). Eco (1997) presents a solution to this problem, explaining architecture and the wider built environment as a semiological system through the meaning attributed to physical structures. His theory, while giving some initial insights into the mechanisms of how culture influences the shapes of built forms, still leaves room for further speculation. With

the multitude of dispersed theoretical work in anthropology, a more comprehensive and explicit conceptual apparatus is called for to evaluate the existing structures properly.

Furthermore, along with the rapidly growing body of research in the discipline of urban morphology, the methods of analyses become far more sophisticated, and, thanks to their heterogeneity, much better adjusted to the actual cultural milieu perused. As part of urban morphology studies, the ontology of urban spaces should be defined based on the careful examination of elements that contribute to a larger picture of the culture of the usage of space. Among these factors, there are the sets of norms and habits of a given group of people, everyday practices and ways how space is used, what meaning it conveys, and what physical elements reflect those activities and rules. This focus has recently become increasingly present in architectural and urban design and morphology research, and the current study, referring to the cultural meaning of physical urban space, may enrich the already defined ontologies, the one proposed by Lopes et al. (2015) and Beirão (2012) for example.

The culture of the usage of space, which is understood here as a set of norms, practices and meanings in a given culture, is inherently related to a concept of situation, defined by Perinbanayagam (1974) as a theatre of human activities. Situation ‘becomes placed’ when physical settings are adjusted to users’ behaviour, and when space is converted into a used place or, in other words, becomes acknowledged by a group of people. To understand the mechanisms that govern the establishment of a culturally recognised situation, we need to look at human behaviour in urban space. An ontology of public spaces based on a methodologically correct approach to observing and understanding the meaning of people’s movements among structures and spaces, and the cultural meanings conveyed by these structures and spaces themselves, now needs to come into being. The currently evolving studies of human behaviour are conducted at various scales, including research in kinesics and proxemics, video analyses and more contemporary methods of tracing human behaviour. They should be drawn together and contribute to the larger picture of human behaviour analysis. When analysing the patterns of people’s distribution, the spatial relation manifests itself at all scales, starting with the regional one, through the town level, in which various subgroups choose places following their preferences related to lifestyle and resulting from their social status, up to the neighbourhood level. In the latter, the way people use space influences the sociometric layout of urban structure and also its physical form while acquiring meaning connected to a given cultural group.

Although researchers in the currently emerging field of outdoor space studies are contributing valuable insights, both to the study of human behaviour and to the study of physical structures, their works are dispersed and concentrated on various and specific, unrelated topics. One of the objectives of this book is first to review and summarise the available methods and research in the fields mentioned above,

to the extent possible in a single work, while also paying attention to some of the potential problems that may arise when looking for their overlap. While drawing upon elements from this disparate research, this book proposes a larger theory that addresses the idea of an order of space as a cultural issue. I believe that embedding the notion of spatial order, which remains a well-known and accepted term in urban design, into the considerations on the culture-related meaning of urban space is key to understanding the impact of culture on the built environment. While many of the specific parts of this dissertation have been examined and proofed, and some bridges between the disciplines have been created, the current study tries to provide a more general picture by explaining the culture related background of the form of urban outdoor spaces.

This book is structured around an empirical case study and theoretical considerations on the analytical methodology. The case study explores the urban environment formerly inhabited, and largely constructed, by Jews in two central Polish districts: Mazovia and Lodz, before the tragedy of the Holocaust. While the Jewish presence lasted from the 11th century until the outbreak of World War II, the most intensive development took place in the 19th century, together with the civilisation changes introduced by industrialisation. Seeing as the urban structures built then still persist, the period became the main focus of the current study. Earlier development is discussed briefly in order to provide the background and awareness of the build-up of urban structures of different features through the ages. In addition, some attention has been paid to the most recent, pre-war, development, especially the summer resorts and newly built health care centres, as the Jewish intelligentsia played a major role in their creation. The analysis of the complex Jewish culture once present there gives us the opportunity to verify its impact on the physical structures and to look for a typology which could allow us to grasp its richness and provide understanding, both in terms of the social structure and the places where various people lived. Moreover, the examination of the norms of this group and the exploration of the acculturation processes in the diachronic aspects led to detailed analyses of their impact on the shape of urban forms. The careful study of their everyday practices and habits on the backdrop of the underlying norms allowed me to consider more concrete rather than abstract features, both with regard to urban structures as well as specific spatial practices and behaviours.

Inspiration for this study came after conducting multiple analyses of past urban structures during urban design classes at the Institute of Architecture and Town Planning, Lodz University of Technology, which covered districts of Łódź formerly inhabited by Jews as well as places located in a range of towns, both large and small, in Lodz and Mazovian voivodships. These places still possess a specific atmosphere which is absent or less present in other parts of the city and other locations. The various spatial threads present there overlap, with new elements overlaying previous structures as well as those built afterwards, the intensity of certain features

changes when moving from one neighbourhood to another. This does not, however, prevent us from perceiving the atmosphere and reading the former meaning if we are aware of the earlier events and situations which habitually took place in a given spot. The conclusion is that the past episodes, happenings and encounters must be disclosed in urban structures.

The objective of this book is twofold: to analyse how heritage structures convey atmosphere and meaning using a given example while searching for methods for the analogical analysis of other sites and cultures, and to explain how the Jewish population of pre-war central Poland lived and how their everyday practices moulded the structures they inhabited. The current book reveals a picture of Jewish urban structures and urban life at a particular moment before the outbreak of World War II. It provides a commentary on the spatial arrangements and the actual effect of the reconfiguration of urban space through bottom-up activities, independent from formal planning and thus not so obvious to grasp from historical documentaries and methods.

The research results presented in the current volume, both on the methodological issues and on the typology of built structures and the culture of Polish Jews in pre-war central Poland, are a result of the work of the last few years. Published and presented in front of several audiences during architectural, urban planning and design, and urban morphology conferences and events, each time raising considerable interest. The current text gathers these thoughts and writing into one thoroughly rearranged and transformed single volume. They are completed with a study of built structures attributed to Jewish culture against the backdrop of the development of Polish urban planning.