

Tarbatt, J.; Tarbatt, C. S. (2020) *The Block. A Guide for Urban Designers, Architects and Town Planners*. London, RIBA. 154 pp, ISBN 978 1 85946874 6.

The Block is one of those books you never knew you needed until you have it. In theory, as design professionals, we shouldn't need it. We should all know what blocks are, we should be able to trace their history and declinations at least summarily, and we should all know that it is through them that people move from the privacy of their homes and enter the social scene.

And yet, we don't. In our practice, we forget that blocks are diverse, and that this diversity contributes to the richness of our cities. We too often fall in the trap of seeing and treating blocks as arthritic, formulaic built forms; one principal form actually: the perimeter block. We treat them as design objects forgetting they are a complex tapestry of thresholds, setbacks, walls, windows, heights, gardens. Depending on how each of these elements are conceived, the block changes, and so too the life in and around it. When I talk of blocks to my students, I always tell them they are like Russian dolls: a block is made of fronts; each front is made of smaller pieces, the plots, and each plot hosts spaces or building typologies, and these become buildings according to who instructs, designs and lives in them. I then ask them to imagine these Russian doll-blocks as dinner guests invited to various parties. Each doll, each block, must allow all of its fronts to go to a different party, so its plots, building typologies and buildings will dress up accordingly. You dress and behave for the party you are attending. You'll not turn up in shorts if you are having dinner with the Queen, right? We need, in essence, to be reminded that this diversity exists.

J and C Tarbatt remind us of this in a simple, accessible way, taking us through a quick but informative journey to remind that "without the block, there would be no streets, just roads. Without streets, there would be no street life, just traffic. Without street life, there would be no city, just buildings" (p.5). Their block is the space defined by streets, so it includes a rich collection of built forms making up what Habraken (Habraken and Teicher, 2000) calls the 'ordinary city'; the authors explain how each of these built forms deals with the practicalities of use and life. This is important as it reminds us of the attention required for good design and the care we need to put in it.

The book is quite simply organised, which is useful. An introductory definition and declaration of intent, to put order amidst the abundant literature on cities and their form in regard to the block, is used to describe all the possible meeting points between private and social life so that those studying and designing them understand fully the implications of choosing one over the other.

Then, a quick but quite comprehensive historic and geographic overview, "Ch 1, Understanding the block", follows to remind the reader of the range of transformations blocks have undergone, from antiquity to current times, across Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia, and of their incredible versatility and responsiveness to political, religious, and functional needs. We see outwards looking and inward looking blocks, blocks filling regular and distorted grids, and blocks accommodating plots currently subdivided and merged according to need, thus changing in volume, density and use as an accordion. Some are built bottom up as needs arose, and some on efficiently surveyed and subdivided land. The authors are quite successful in this section at debunking the sense that grids and blocks are uniform. Even in colonial examples, it is the flexible essence of the block that allows locals to disentangle it from the "farcical imposition of one culture's agenda over another" (p. 21), and develop as appropriate, through mud huts as in the Burkina Faso example. Moving on historically, the authors then introduce the modern, and postmodern blocks and larger units, which have a reversed relationship between built form and street.

"Ch 2 Defining the Block" is an overview of block types. This is a useful, neat chapter that defines six main types based on the relationship they create between public and private realms. The last section of the chapter is dedicated to a further 3 elements that can be part of blocks - the court, close and cul-de-sac. Each of the 6 types plus 3 elements is illustrated through same-scale layout

diagrams, showing streets, plots, access to shared spaces and individual plots, and pictures of built examples, past and present. A summary of distinctive features and design challenges provides a quick comparable snapshot of all. Accounting for internal spaces, such as courts, gives a sense of the change in size of these blocks through the types.

This book bears much affinity with Panerai et al. (2004) (Panerai et al., 2004), but whilst the latter was a concerted criticism of the loss of the block's quintessential urbanity, this has a much more matter of fact attitude: these are all the variations of the block, these are their traits, and this is how they each deal with common design challenges (i.e. permeability; density and intensity; mix and diversity; the street; the courtyard; the next-door block; corners and finally parking). The above is the focus of "Ch 3 Designing the Block". Lastly, "Ch 4 Illustrating the Block", is a useful collection of block exemplars, mostly from the UK, but with some from Europe, organised into urban, suburban and peri-urban typologies, each described, again, through layout diagrams and images, and summarised through examples of success and failure.

Overall, this book is a useful and svelte compendium, which does not claim to be the be-all and end-all on the matter. For an in-depth historical study of urban blocks, nothing really beats the wonderfully rich and thoroughly researched *Urbanity and Density in 20th Century Urban Design* (Sonne, Wolfgang, 2017). For a specific narrative on the modern evolution of the block, *Urban Forms: the death and life of the urban block* (Penerai, et al., 2004) is still the clearest and most compelling. But for students and practitioners, this is an important, efficient source which I will surely recommend and keep in my library, next to *The Plot* (Tarbatt, 2012), which remains one of my favourite books.

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