

Obituary: J. W. R. Whitehand (1938–2021)

Jeremy William Richard Whitehand invariably wrote as J. W. R. Whitehand, but was known to a vast number of friends, colleagues and collaborators simply as Jeremy. He was born in 1938 in Reading, England. He took up tennis and looking with critical interest at towns and cities early, and developed both interests at the University of Reading where he completed his PhD in 1965 (see Conzen and Oliveira, 2021). His first academic post was at the University of Newcastle where he met M. R. G. Conzen, whose ideas and way of working were to influence Jeremy's whole career; whose son Michael became a lifelong friend and collaborator, and where he met his future wife Susan. After several years at Glasgow he came to Birmingham in 1971, where he remained.

In his own turn, through a long career and into retirement, Jeremy himself shaped his specialist subject area, the study of urban form, or urban morphology. At Birmingham he founded the Urban Morphology Research Group (UMRG), supervised 58 research degrees and published something like 6 books, 32 book chapters, 81 journal papers, and 75 conference papers. One aspect of his generosity is that so many publications were co-authored with his students or research associates – giving them an early helping hand into the academic world, and continuing to work with them long after they had established their careers. This does not, of course, detract from the magisterial nature of his sole-authored work.

Over the course of half a century, Jeremy was a key contributor to the definition of urban morphology as a field of knowledge and, within it, to the establishment of the historico-geographical approach, proposing and refining several morphological theories, concepts and methods (Oliveira, 2019). This extended to his last paper published in this journal (Whitehand, 2019). He was a driving force in raising awareness of the conceptual richness of M. R. G. Conzen's work (Whitehand, 1981), and exploring how it can be applied to contemporary circumstances, cultures and urban forms. He was particularly successful in



Figure 1: Jeremy Whitehand giving his inaugural presentation as Visiting Professor, Birmingham City University, 2007 (source: Birmingham City University / Peter J. Larkham).

securing grants for recruiting research fellows and broadening his research activities. From the end of the 1980s onwards, Jeremy systematically developed the concept of the morphological region through his own research work and the supervision of PhD students and visiting researchers. But his main research interest was the development of the fringe-belt concept, exploring new aspects of its spatial dimension, adding economic and planning perspectives, and confirming its validity in different geographical and cultural contexts. His professorial inaugural lecture sought to draw together these strands succinctly (a version was published as Whitehand, 1994).

He was not showered with honours and medals by academic or professional organizations. He did not seek the limelight: rather the reverse. He had no profiles on Researchgate or Academia, and was relatively untroubled by the current demands of research impact. For Jeremy, the absolute priority was always the quality of the work: that would speak



Figure 2: Jeremy and Susan Whitehand working in the field with Tonya Tang and Feng Song, Pingyao, 2009 (source: Kai Gu).

for itself. It is typical that a major, innovative and detailed study of the residential development process was not only published as a Departmental Occasional Publication (Whitehand, 1989: elements did find their way into later papers) but he did not make it widely known that the property being studied was, in fact, his family home. His humour did find expression in his research: an early paper used an ‘unacademic’ term for a form of fringe belt: the London ‘cocktail belt’ (Whitehand, 1967). And he saw the irony of publishing papers on residential intensification, ‘housebuilding in the back garden’ (Whitehand and Larkham, 1991), and then moving into a large Victorian villa on the city edge after a previous owner had developed one house in its front garden and several more in the formerly lengthy rear garden. In the field survey of interwar garden suburbs in Guangzhou, he aptly named them as ‘garden suburbs with gardens’.

He was not particularly concerned about amassing citations: indeed, he had written critically about citation analysis. Nevertheless, a number of his key publications were ‘centurions’ (a concept examined in Whitehand,

1985). Even in today’s climate of increasing volume of academic publication, this is a noteworthy achievement: the papers are indicated with an asterisk and the number of Google Scholar citations as at July 2021 in the list below.

As a PhD supervisor he was amazing: a fount of knowledge and ideas. If he had not written the book or paper, he seemed not only to have a copy, but he knew the author. In fact, Jeremy was astonishingly well connected. He referred to so many giants in the field – the authors of the classic textbooks – by their first names, and he made sure to introduce us to the right people at conferences. He was a good networker, always interested in meeting new people and talking about their research. And he was interested in the *person*. That was especially true in his nurturing of younger researchers. He listened carefully, and he was generous with his wise advice. This skill was also essential in building the network that grew into ISUF, and helped to develop the journal that he founded.

In 1990, Jeremy chaired an important international conference in Birmingham and

co-edited a book gathering contributions from researchers in Europe and North America (Whitehand and Larkham, 1992). Four years later, in 1994, a group of some 20 urban morphologists, from five different countries, met in Lausanne and founded ISUF. After three meetings in consecutive years in Lausanne, increasing slowly in number but essentially of a private, invitation-only group, Jeremy led the organization of the first ISUF open conference in Birmingham, in 1997. Somewhat to our surprise over 100 people attended. Seven years later, he and Michael Barke organized a further ISUF conference, this time in Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne, and in association with the International Geographical Union. ISUF is now a principal world organization for urban landscape research with over 600 institutional and individual members in 40 countries. Jeremy was instrumental in the building of ISUF's institutional foundations and promoting its growth. The success of ISUF as a world forum for new ideas and actions in different cultures owes much to Jeremy's years of dedication and voluntary service.

At the third Lausanne meeting, in 1996, it was agreed to establish an academic refereed journal. In September the following year, the first issue of *Urban Morphology*, edited by Jeremy, was published. Over more than two decades, under Jeremy's editorship, building a reputation for quality and reliability and retaining its independence by resisting numerous approaches from commercial publishers, *Urban Morphology* has grown into a recognized and significant journal, widely abstracted and indexed. Jeremy was indefatigable in keeping it focused on the urban landscape and seeking to enhance its quality and widen its catchment. In addition, he devoted an exceptional amount of work in minutely-detailed editing much of what is published (as much of its content is by authors for whom English is not their first language). He had honed this editorial approach through editing the Institute of British Geographers' journal *Area*, where he once very carefully, thoughtfully and precisely pencilled through all but one word on the first page of a submitted paper, leaving only the word 'The'.

Jeremy had also a central role in the establishment and development of ISUF's regional networks, notably the Portuguese-language Network of Urban Morphology (PNUM). From the establishment of the network at ISUF's Hamburg conference in 2010, to the first PNUM annual conference in 2011, the launching of the *Revista de Morfologia Urbana* in 2013, and the realization of the first annual workshop in 2015, Jeremy was actively involved in all initiatives sharing his morphological knowledge and offering strategic advice.

His curiosity was a key factor in his success, too. Not only was he interested in new people, but new places. And he wanted to explore them in person, in detail. Field excursions with him were a delight, *if* you were prepared for much walking, much detail, and lots of questions to think about. It could literally be difficult to keep up. On one occasion on the way back from a conference, he and colleagues were at Schiphol airport, but Jeremy had booked a later flight to Birmingham: he wanted to walk from the airport into Amsterdam centre to look at all the new development, but it looked as though it might rain, so could he borrow a foldable plastic raincoat from one of us? And then there was the late-night excursion at the ISUF meeting in Groningen, where he was very interested in the unusually large first-floor windows of all these properties: someone said 'Jeremy, you shouldn't be looking too closely, this *is* the red-light district after all!'. He *did* know, but he was gently teasing anyone prone to be easily offended by the realities of the links between physical urban form and those inhabiting and using it. Even red-light districts and other such fringe spaces and uses merit investigation, as one of his former PhD students later did – with difficulty.

With such an imposing stature and formal, even austere appearance, Jeremy could seem stern, a formidable taskmaster. But, looking back as former students and research collaborators, he did this in a delightful way – even as students he treated us as equals, expecting that *of course* we had all read all these new papers . . . Of course we had not, or not all of them anyway. Again, it could be difficult to

keep up. But his style meant that we all wanted to live up to those expectations. And that, for PhD students, meant hard work, attention to detail, regular discussions but, as he said, we could take ‘as much holiday *as you dare*’.

Since the early 2000s, the UMRG has been joined by a number of Research Fellows from China, Japan and Korea in an attempt to build bridges between East and West. With the support of the British Council, the British Academy, and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), a series of exploratory projects concerning a cross-cultural application of morphological theory were carried out. Jeremy’s field-based research extended to a number of Chinese towns and cities, including large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and some relatively remote settlements in Shanxi and Henan. His adaptive approach to the Chinese urban landscape was closely connected to his re-examination of the relationships between the fundamental urban form complexes, in particular those relationships in a more authoritarian society with major differences in the precepts influencing settlements. His morphological investigation of Chinese cities, which diversifies and complements the established body of knowledge on Chinese urban form, is novel and groundbreaking. Most of all, it suggests the resolution of the tension in China between, on the one hand, the need for cultural continuity and physical conservation and, on the other, accommodation of the physical changes demanded by major economic growth. That is why so many, especially in recent years from China, wanted to come to Birmingham and study with him.

Supported by his research associates, Jeremy compared fringe belts in China and Europe (Conzen *et al.*, 2012); the residential typological processes of Shanghai and England (Whitehand *et al.*, 2014); and the traditional urban form of Pingyao, China and that of Como, Italy (Whitehand *et al.*, 2016). He concluded that East and West are very different. Nevertheless, the same ideas and methods can help us understand both East and West. And they can also help us plan both East and West. Jeremy’s research has been

a major source of inspiration for the subsequent studies of Chinese urban morphology. His work in China has helped the development of a local network of urban morphology, and a second UMRG based at the University of Peking. He was an Honorary Professor of the University of Shanxi, China, 2005–8, and Urban Planning Consultant to Pingyao County, Shanxi Province, China, 2006–19. It is noteworthy that the 2009 and 2016 ISUF conferences were organised in Guangzhou and Nanjing respectively, the only ISUF conferences in Asia; and will revisit Nanjing in 2024. Jeremy sowed many seeds in urban morphology in China. What he planted there will continue to grow.

A few comments from colleagues received in the days immediately following his death are worth repeating as they say so much about how he was seen by fellow urban morphologists:

From a Chinese architect academic: ‘He was such a kind and generous mind, and his contribution to the field of urban morphology was enormous. It was he who led me, an architect, to understand urban morphology. His persistence in learning and tolerance for beginners led many Chinese architects to enter the field of urban morphology and use this knowledge and method to solve the ongoing problems of urban development. My colleagues and I miss him, and he will always be with us in our research journey’.

From someone recalling their introduction to ISUF in 1997: ‘Jeremy was practically the first person I met at ISUF, in Birmingham. I had no idea who he was, but he greeted me warmly and took us all seriously, despite our naïveté’.

From a long-term research collaborator: ‘We all admire Jeremy’s towering scholarship. It is attributed to his exceptional ability to comprehend and represent very complex ideas and objects. His organizational strategies and practices are equally important. He integrated his work and life seamlessly. A large part of his writing is derived from field research. Asking a lot of questions spurs great ideas’.

And from another long-standing ISUF member and editorial board member: 'Since my first ISUF meeting in Florence, I have been moved by Jeremy's commitment to the field, his intellectual generosity, his clarity, and his friendship. He will be missed, and I hope that we will develop a suitable way to remember him'.

Finally, to so many scholars Jeremy offered encouragement, support, and his time. With Susan, he often offered the hospitality of their home. He leaves a substantial body of high-quality publications. It is given to few people to be remembered so fondly by so many for both their achievements and their humanity. Jeremy Whitehand was certainly one of these.

Key publications by J. W. R. Whitehand

- Whitehand, J. W. R. (1967) 'The settlement morphology of London's cocktail belt', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 58, 20–7.
- Whitehand, J. W. R. (1967) 'Fringe belts: an neglected aspect of urban geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, 223–33 (* 140 citations).
- Whitehand, J. W. R. and Alauddin, K. (1969) 'The town plans of Scotland: some preliminary considerations', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 85, 109–21.
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- Whitehand, J. W. R. (1972) 'Urban-rent theory, time series and morphogenesis: an example of eclecticism in geographical research', *Area* 4, 215–22.
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Interviews

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- Conzen, M. P. and Oliveira, V. (2021) ‘Becoming an urban morphologist: Jeremy W. R. Whitehand’, *Urban Morphology* 25, 76–88.
- Larkham, P. J. and Conzen, M. P. (eds) (2014) *Shapers of urban form* (Routledge, New York).
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