Reputations

John F.C. Turner (b.1927)
by Kathrin Golda-Pongratz

Key publications

Dwelling resources in South America. In: Architectural Design (1963)
A new view of the housing deficit (1966)
Uncontrolled urban settlement: Problems and policies (1968)
The squatter settlement: An architecture that works. In: Architectural Design (1968)
Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process (1972)
Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments (1976)
Fifty years of the community-led incremental development paradigm for urban housing and place-making (2015)
Autoconstrucción: Por una autonomía del habitar (2018)

A quote

"It is my increasing impression, more a hope perhaps, that interest in nature- and community-based principles and practices is growing from a small but ancient base. In fact, I am sure that it is the only realistic hope for a real civilization." (in an Email from 2014)

In Hastings, in the tenth decade of an active life that has profoundly influenced the ways we think about urban development, community building and housing as process, John F. C. Turner and his wife Beth look out from their home on a Victorian terrace onto the landscape. It is their ‘outlook tower’, in the Geddesian sense, in a carefully selected location: a personal manifestation of a relational concept of housing. The influence of Patrick Geddes has been critical in shaping the concept of relational housing and Turner’s thinking at large. He first encountered the Scottish biologist’s writings, diagrams and urban surveys at the age of 19 while studying at the Architectural Association in London. Inspired by his teacher Jacqueline Thyrvitt and encouraged by Colin Ward to publish in Freedom, Turner started interpreting and applying Geddes’ schemes and thoughts to the field of architecture with friends and fellow students Bruce Martin and Paffard Keatinge-Clay. The holistic reading of placemaking, regional planning and relational housing were to become lifelong pursuits, investigated and tested through personal experiences.

Turner’s small studio in Hastings, from where he looks back (and forward, as he always does), gathers, in well-organised and meticulously colour-coded archival boxes, the findings and achievements of a life dedicated to constructing a theory on housing and attempting to translate findings, patterns and processes into a universal language. His working table accumulates papers and recent publications, mostly related to mathematical and systemic questions (Marcus du Sautoy’s What we cannot know is one of them) or to ecological issues and principles of subsidiarity and economic strategies in a context of degrowth (such as The Resilience Imperative by Michael Lewis and Pat Conaty). Paradigm changes and thoughts about our world’s future are at the forefront of Turner’s mind. Those who collaborate and are
in correspondence with him are constantly challenged by his social, metaphysical and mathematical questions.

Borrowing from Ivan Illich, author of Deschooling Society and someone he also admired, Turner says he was 'des schooled as an architect' when working in Peru between 1957 and 1965. Invited by Peruvian colleague Eduardo Neira, whom he had first met at a CIAM summer school in Venice in 1952 and who shared a fascination for Patrick Geddes, Turner moved to Peru five years later, working as a young architect first in Arequipa and then in Lima, with both international and state housing agencies.

In Arequipa he collaborated with his friend Pat Crooke, who supervised a programme for self-built schools and with whom Turner would experience a first ‘directed mutual aid self-help project’, as described by Helen Gyger in Improvised Cities. During his Peruvian years, Turner gradually moved from fieldwork to theory. What he calls the ‘Geddes formula’, alluding to the to the holistic construction of a ‘four-fold reality’ made up by Acts, Facts, Dreams and Deeds in the Notation of Life diagram, stayed with him and helped him structure and frame his early work. By observing self-built processes in Peru, Turner studied the systematisation techniques of aided self-help housing and consolidated his holistic perception of housing and urban development.

His collaboration with anthropologists William Mangin, Eduardo Soler, Marcia Koth de Paredes and Neira’s cousin José Matos Mar helped him analyse the key role played by the dwellers and the human capacity for community building. These observations led Turner to perceive the Peruvian barriadas or self-built squatter settlements often initially formed upon a land invasion as a resource rather than a problem. Architecturally, he described them as a valid urban form and as ‘an achievement whose existence is self-justifying and whose appearance is irrelevant’. These observations were comprehensively published and illustrated in the special issue of Architectural Design of 1963 – Turner was invited to guest-edit the issue after Monica Pigeon passed through Peru and met him; he likes to underline he was in the right place at the right time.

Recalling the ideas of anarchist geographer Piotr Kropotkin, Turner merged them with the experience of the Andean concept of the minka as collective and reciprocal work practiced in Peruvian communities to articulate his positions on aided self-help, bringing together self-generated community development and the principle of mutual aid. While his emphasis on local action has been interpreted widely as an anti-state position, Turner (who describes himself as a ‘moderate anarchist’) defines the architect as an ‘enabler’ and organiser of a necessary equilibrium between a community and the state. By the end of his Peruvian period, he insists on the central role of autonomy and the fundamental subsidiary role of the state in the housing question.

These ideas were further developed and published after he left Peru in 1965 and joined the Harvard-MIT Joint Center on Urban Studies. Meeting Charles Abrams at the MIT in 1964 and reading his then just-published Man’s struggle for shelter in an urbanizing world further progressed Turner’s relational concept of housing, and in 1966 he published A new view of the housing deficit. He remembers it as the product of his ‘one and only Eureka moment’ in which he explains ‘why what matters most about finding and making a place is what it does to and for people who do and use it, not what it is materially’. Indeed, Turner’s understanding of housing focuses on the relationships the inhabitants maintain with the environment. Rather than object or product, he sees it as process. His view that the user establishes a rich relation with the dwelling itself has long been neglected, especially in the Latin American context, but remains important today.

After having pursued important work also on self-help housing in the USA (a thick report on that is still to be further explored!), John Turner returned, with his second wife Bertha, to
England in 1973. He started teaching at the AA School of Tropical Architecture under Otto Koenigsberger, and then, until 1983, at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit in London – he still feels very connected to both schools. During the 1970s his self-help approach shaped the dominant housing strategies of international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank. Turner also published his most influential work, translated into multiple languages: Freedom to Build (1972) with Robert Fichter and Housing by People (1976), which confirm his interest in anarchist ideas through the differentiation of heteronomous systems (centrally-administrated and “other-determined”) and autonomous systems (locally self-governing and “self-determined”). The traditional top-down dynamic stands thus versus a network of users making decisions for themselves. Housing by people became a crucial base for debate at the Habitat I conference in Vancouver, where Turner was one of the key speakers. While a major consensus existed on the productive potential of decision-making and user control in the housing process, as Enrique Ortiz from the Habitat International Coalition points out, Turner was criticised for not having addressed the structural causes and inequalities that instigate precarious settlements, and for not having explained how inhabitants could acquire real power.

Turner’s vision of collaboration and collective community development then was ethical rather than economical, and Marxist criticism grew louder, coming from Peruvian colleagues such as Diego Robles – in 1969 Robles had already sustained that self-help schemes within the existing societal conditions and capitalist framework would not allow dwellers to improve their economic conditions at large. Rod Burgess’s critique of Turner in his article ‘Self-Help Housing Advocacy: A Curious Form of Radicalism’ from 1982 went even further, arguing that the insistence on the individual freedom of the dweller accelerates the logics of the market and eventually produces a housing shortage. Twenty-four years later, Mike Davis blames Turner in Planet of Slums (2006) directly for the existence of slums around the globe, condemning a ‘supremely odd intellectual marriage’ between John Turner and the World Bank President Robert McNamara, and accusing Turner of being a ‘singuarily effective popularizer and propagandist’ of a ‘romanticized’ squatter-type incremental housing. The criticism is harsh, and imparted to Turner a persistent fear of being misunderstood.

Receiving the Right Livelihood Award (RLA) in 1988 for ‘championing the rights of people to build, manage and sustain their own shelter and communities’ marked a turning point as Turner then continued his community and theoretical work free of any institutional ties. The Turners moved to Hastings and have since been committed to local development and community regeneration, reaffirming the cultural-ecological imagination of a historic landscape in the terraced housing development of West Hill. Hastings is a rich territory for community and place-making, where nature- and community-based principles and practices are shared with friends, neighbours and collaborators. His engagement in the Hastings Trust is an essential part of it.

Contact with other RLA laureates and the need for a ‘new human story’ formulated by RLA founder Jakob von Uexküll reaffirmed Turner’s profound interest in story-telling and narration. He connects “Emmanuel Quispe’s Story”, a beautiful composite case history of a life-long experience of urbanization through an alter ego with his own birthdate 1927 to the year 2000, to his ongoing search for creating holistic frameworks and universal tools for interpreting and testing place- and community-making processes. This search, carried out with his old friend Bruce Martin in a correspondence until 2007, is based on a reinterpretation of the four Geddesian terms matter, pattern, meaning and process – Turner still holds onto these four ‘dimensions’ or ‘quarters’, long after first encountering them in his student years at the AA.

Anticipating, and responding to, the need to continue re-reading Turner, a collection of his writings were recently translated into Spanish and released by publishing house Pepitas de Calabaza – which translates as ‘Pumpkin Seeds’. With his sensitivity for language, he liked the metaphor of the seeds because ‘it explains the use of old articles while anticipating fruit of the kind we are searching for as pattern-seeking and story-telling animals’. In order to
continue writing his ‘new story’, it was important to reconnect with some of the Peruvian self-built neighbourhoods Turner studied in their creation 60 years ago. He had written the script for UNTV documentary ‘A roof of my own’ in 1964 (made to transmit the innovative Peruvian housing approaches to a US audience but never broadcasted due to censorship as for its positive tone towards self-organisation) and the evolution of El Ermitaño is revisited in a new documentary I co-directed City Unfinished – Voices of El Ermitaño (2018). As a collective portrait of the neighbourhood’s current challenges such as the disintegration of community networks, the high risk for dwellers in new and unstable hill invasions and the threats to the unique semi-arid ecosystem in the area, it reaffirms the need for a contemporary contextualisation of Turner’s former and current thoughts and insinuates a holistic reading of housing strategies and the built environment.

More and new tools for community regeneration are needed. According to Turner, what matters and what we have to strive for today are ‘person-to-person relationships and the strengthening of neighbourhoods and societies through these personal and local relationships, and the contributions made to the community of all life on earth’ – a lifetime challenge and pursuit to be continued for and by future generations.