Charles Rawding

Charles challenges the Burgess model of urban development and proposes instead a process model, giving Brighton as an example.

Raising **Issues**

Putting Burgess in the bin

As a GCSE regional moderator fifteen or so years ago, I had the misfortune to have to look at studies in which students were required to apply the Burgess model (Figure 1) to Dorking in Surrey – and not much has changed since then. In my opinion, the Burgess model (Burgess, 1925) has no place in the geography curriculum and should never have achieved acceptance as a model of urban structure. Ernest Watson Burgess, the urban sociologist who created the model, adapted a model of plant succession favoured by his ecologist friends to an economic context to explain patterns of urban land use in Chicago in the 1920s (Figure 1). Somehow the Burgess model became the most important model in geography in the schools of England, and even though it was based on Chicago in the 1920s and was contested at the time, it was used to explain land use in a range of very different modern English towns and cities (Johnston 1971; Garner 1968). It is still in use today. And it shouldn't be!

The wholesale adoption of the Burgess model has fossilised our understanding of the incredibly dynamic nature of urban landscapes; more seriously, it renders sterile the urban landscapes we introduce to our students. Urban geography should be the most riveting of topics, especially for the 85% of our students who live in urban areas: it should reflect the excitement, fluidity, inequalities and problems of everyday life in cities. Instead, the Burgess model reduces it to a two-dimensional, circular diagram.

I propose a rather different approach to interpreting urban landscapes, which stresses the dynamic interplay of the range of processes which contributes to our ever-changing cityscape. I hope to be able to demonstrate this interplay through a brief discussion of some of the urban geographies (a deliberate plural) that have created contemporary Brighton.

Process and place

All places are the outcome of a wide range of processes: their importance will have varied over time and their influence will have resulted in a series of consequences for future development (Rawding, 2007). Notions of a palimpsest comparison are useful here – a canvas which has been created layer upon layer, some previous layers having been obliterated and some having survived. However, the crucial element for explanation lies with the processes that produce the landscapes. I've tried to represent this diagrammatically (Figure 2) – all locations start with a physical setting which may or may not have a significant influence on subsequent developments. Clearly, in the case of Brighton, its development cannot be understood without reference to its physical setting. At the same time, the development of its outer council estates and suburbs have limited connections with their own physical site but can only be understood in relation to their physical situation, i.e. their proximity, or lack of it, to the urban core of Brighton, or indeed the London-Brighton main railway line or the A23.





Figure 1: The Burgess model of urban development. © Teaching Geography

Figure 2: Considering place as a process.

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Building onto this physical setting, we then need to incorporate explanations that identify the key economic, social, political, cultural and personal processes that have helped to establish a given urban area. These are not fixed forces – they vary over time. Nor are they simple linear progressions; the reality is much more interesting: complex, often contradictory or conflicting, sometimes consensual, but infinitely more reflective of a society that has seen massive shifts over the last 200 years.

The example of Brighton

Taking as an example the urban geographies of Brighton, it becomes clearer how such a framework might be developed. The original medieval town was eroded by the sea, burnt to the ground by the French, and flattened by storms. However, Brighton's Lanes district is one of very few surviving examples of a Tudor fishing town (Figure 3). Brighton had been a fishing port up until the mid-sixteenth century, but by the mid-eighteenth century only a limited amount of coastal trade remained.

By the 1750s, the growing fashion for sea bathing led to the development of resort functions in some coastal towns. In Brighton this was as a direct result of investment by tradesmen from Lewes who spotted a business opportunity following the establishment of a house for the reception of patients in 1751-2 by Richard Russell of Lewes who was using seawater treatment. Libraries, a large inn and assembly rooms, shops, better transport facilities and new housing were all constructed, so that by 1783, when the Prince of Wales made his first visit, Brighton was already Britain's largest seaside resort. The Prince of Wales came because of Brighton's fashionable reputation, he did not create it, but of course his subsequent decision to build the Royal Pavilion (completed by 1806) helped cement Brighton's position at the forefront of seaside resorts (Figure 4).

So far, so historical; however, if we now look at the pattern of the town's growth, it becomes clear that there is a range of factors which come into play. Before about 1780, most of the town's housing and services were located in the Old Town (The Lanes). The rest of Brighton's parish was arranged as five large open fields owned in strips by a multiplicity of landowners. The town's growth from 1780 was determined by the field system surrounding it. Building development converted the unenclosed strips to the north, east and immediate west sides into the modern street pattern. This is a fossilised landscape i.e. urban development has simply overlaid the old field system. Brighton's medieval fields determined the shape of the streets around the edges of the Old Town. When the Old Town expanded, builders bought up the narrow fields (Figure 5).

If we now zoom in on this townscape, it becomes clear that unplanned infill resulted in urban chaos, with bad sanitation and poor health in working class areas (Lowerson, 1983). The fashionable area was along the cliff tops and beside the Steine (the open area north and east of the Pavilion). As early as 1808, the Royal Crescent was built as an isolated, and initially unsuccessful, speculative development. By the 1820s, the town had spread beyond the limits of the unenclosed strips; larger areas of enclosed land offered opportunities for grander squares, crescents and terraces (Figure 6).

The railway from London arrived in 1841 and links to the east and west were in existence by 1847 (Farrant, 1983). The impact of the railway in resort terms was slower than anticipated; however, the construction of the railway gave employment to 3000 people and resulted in the growth of an area of working class housing north of the existing settlement.









Figure 3: The Lanes, Brighton. Photo: © Melanie Norman.

Figure 4: The Royal Pavilion, Brighton. **Photo:** © Flickr/ Andrew Writer.

Figure 5: Landscapes determined by the fossilised field systems. Photo: © Melanie Norman.

Figure 6: The grander, more spacious, layouts on already enclosed land: Brighton's squares and crescents. Photo: © Shutterstock/ Vittorio Caramazza. During the inter-war period the contrast between the wealth of the Regency terraces and crescents and the solid, secure suburbs with the slums of central Brighton was described by Graham Greene in Brighton Rock (1938). He also describes the effects of council slum clearance and rehousing either in new, outlying estates or dwellings built on slum clearance sites. We are beginning to see here layer upon layer of development and redevelopment for a range of economic, social and political reasons. These changes continue, sometimes transposing their original purposes: for instance; the gentrification of Victorian workingclass terraces coinciding with the subdivision of Victorian middle-class houses to provide the cheapest housing stock for those on the lowest incomes - often students, in the case of Brighton.

Although much less affected than many British cities by the Second World War there is clear evidence of historical discontinuities in several locations, where modern infilling has replaced bomb-damaged buildings.

The discussion so far has focused largely on patterns of residential properties, but in the case of Brighton there is a significant built environment connected to the growth of the city as a resort and centre for consumption. However, if we attempt to explain patterns of retail, for instance, we first have to define what we mean by retail – chain store Brighton (Western Road and Churchill Square) or tourist Brighton (The Lanes) or interesting and quirky Brighton (The North Laine)?

The second aspect of geographies of consumption in Brighton, of course, relates to the sea front, an extremely dynamic area of recent change. The area has been transformed from a beach-focused, family-orientated space into a playground for the drinking classes. Again, this is a reflection of the changing nature of leisure activities.

Conclusions

Hopefully this brief focus on the urban geographies of Brighton has highlighted how diverse and complex cities are (Figure 7), and shown the total inadequacy of obsolete, simplistic models such as Burgess in understanding the complexity and dynamism of an urban area. | **TG**



Feedback

If you have any comments or views that you would like to share on this article please email Elaine Anderson at the GA (eanderson @geography.org.uk) and we will aim to include a number of them in the next issue of *Teaching Geography*.

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