

# Globalization, UNESCO, urban morphology and local responses

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**Abstract.** *This paper reflects on some of the basic statements by international bodies such as UNESCO and UN-HABITAT concerning the protection, conservation and restoration of historical urban centres. These statements are seen as a challenge to the community of urban morphologists of various backgrounds. The paper pleads for a stronger involvement of academic research and urban planning in the political decision-making processes at local, regional and transnational levels. It concludes with suggestions about how to achieve a stronger visibility of urban morphology in theory and practice and how to improve the network embracing urban morphologists in the broadest sense and policy makers at various scales from local to global.*

*Keywords: UNESCO Convention, co-operation, academic research, political action*

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‘The 21st century will be the century of cities!’ This introductory statement in the most recent report of the Wissenschaftliche Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen (WBGU, 2016) identifies one of the main challenges of human society in the years to come. Today’s urbanization processes are unparalleled in the history of mankind. As such, they are very high on the agenda of international politics. Cities and urban agglomerations are centres of globalization, hotspots of worldwide atmospheric pollution and environmental degradation, and key elements in the causes and consequences of global climatic change.

In 2016–17 there were major political conferences in which urban developments and their ecological, economic and social impacts on cities played a major role. UNESCO held its World Heritage Conference in Krakow, Poland. Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, in Quito, Ecuador in 2016 adopted a ‘New

Urban Agenda’ (UN Habitat III, 2017). And the recent UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn, Germany has reiterated the dangers of rapidly growing urban centres and increasing urban sprawl.

Nevertheless, in view of the specific role of historical urban centres in regional and national heritage and human wellbeing it may be appropriate to recall the political reasoning of the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972) (hereafter referred to as the ‘Convention’) as well as the academic foundations and goals of the journal *Urban Morphology*. The following reflections are intended to be:

- a reminder of the basic and still valid intentions of both the Convention and this journal;
- a consideration of how to combine academic research with political decision-making processes at local, regional and national scales; and

- a suggestion of how to overcome the deplorable gaps between theory and practice and between research and application.

### **Back to the future: the Convention of 1972 and *Urban Morphology* in 1997**

A reconsideration of the original intentions and visions of political agreements and academic arguments serves as a starting point.

The preamble to the Convention stresses – among many other matters – ‘that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction’ (UNESCO, 1972).

Damage and destruction are seen as ‘a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world’. And ‘safeguarding ... this unique and irreplaceable property ... [and] ... the need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole’ are necessities of general concern.

What, then, is ‘cultural heritage’ and how is it defined? The following excerpts focus specifically on urban issues and are quoted selectively. *Article 1* of the Convention defines cultural heritage as

*Monuments*: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements of structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science.

*Groups of buildings*: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science.

*Sites*: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

*Article 5* suggests national and international protection of such sites. This Article may be the most specific for the purpose of this paper and is therefore quoted in detail. It reads as follows:

To ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the *protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage* situated on its territory, each State Party to this Convention shall endeavour, in so far as possible, and as appropriate for each country:

- a) to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes;
- b) to set up within its territories, where such services do not exist, one or more services for the protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage with an appropriate staff possessing the means to discharge their functions;
- c) to develop scientific and technical studies and research and to work out such operating methods as will make the State capable of counteracting the dangers that threaten its cultural or natural heritage;
- d) to take the appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation of this heritage.

Finally, *Article 27*, focusing on educational programmes, gives practical advice to researchers on having the results of their studies incorporated in the theory and practice of urban policies, be they on local, regional or even international levels.

### *Urban Morphology* in 1997

Twenty-five years after the proclamation of the UNESCO Convention, the journal *Urban Morphology* came into existence. An outcome of the International Seminar on Urban Form

(ISUF), it was first published in 1997. Its introductory lead article by Anne Vernez Moudon describes the aims and tasks as follows:

Urban morphologists ... analyse a city's evolution from its formative years to its subsequent transformations, identifying and dissecting its various components. The city is the accumulation and the integration of many individual and small group actions, themselves governed by cultural traditions and shaped by social and economic forces over time. ... They study the outcomes of ideas and intentions as they take shape on the ground and mould our cities. Buildings, gardens, streets, parks, and monuments, are among the main elements of morphological analysis. These elements, however, are considered as organisms which are constantly used and hence transformed through time. They also exist in a state of tight and dynamic interrelationship: built structures shaping and being shaped by the open spaces around them, public streets serving and being used by private land owners along them. The dynamic state of the city, and the pervasive relationship between its elements, have led many urban morphologists to prefer the term 'urban morphogenesis' to describe their field of study (Moudon, 1997, p. 3).

Its theoretical basis is founded on three principles:

1. Urban form is defined by three fundamental physical elements: buildings and their related open spaces, plots or lots, and streets.
2. Urban form can be understood at different levels of resolution. Commonly, four are recognized, corresponding to the building/lot, the street/block, the city, and the region.
3. Urban form can only be understood historically since the elements of which it is comprised undergo continuous transformation and replacement.

Thus *form*, *resolution*, and *time* constitute the three fundamental components of urban morphological research' (Moudon, 1997, p. 7).

Beyond its specific aim and goal to bring together different academic disciplines engaged in urban studies (geography, architecture, urban planning and others), it was and

is 'ISUF's ambitious mission ... to address real and timely issues concerning city building by providing a forum for thought and action which includes related disciplines and professions in different cultures' (Moudon, 1997, p. 3).

It is not surprising that the seemingly juxtaposed positions of a politically-based plan of action and the academically argued intellectual and theoretical foundations of a scientific discipline do not necessarily coincide. Yet there is considerable complementarity and overlap. Protection, conservation and presentation of cultural heritage demand basic scientific research. Research and documentation of cultural sites are inherent preconditions for their acknowledgement as World Heritage objects, including as monuments, groups of buildings or historical urban ensembles.

The fact that even the New Urban Agenda makes reference to the necessities of protection and conservation of traditional urban fabric gives additional support to the basic argument that politics and research should be seen as two sides of the same coin and the need for closer co-operation. *Article 125* (out of a total of 175) of the New Urban Agenda reads as follows:

We will support the leveraging of cultural heritage for sustainable urban development and recognize its role in stimulating participation and responsibility. We will promote innovative and sustainable use of architectural monuments and sites, with the intention of value creation, through respectful restoration and adaptation ... (UN Habitat III, 2017).

### **The Convention, globalization and local responses**

The Convention is a politically important, internationally highly competitive and culturally extremely prestigious programme. Its highest award, the title of a 'World Heritage Site', requires the fulfilment of high standards of eligibility and the assurance of safe-keeping these properties for future generations. These preconditions are in many cases associated

with major economic benefits for the award winners through tourism or other marketing strategies.

In 2016/17 there were 1052 cultural and natural heritage sites, '814 of which are cultural, 203 natural and 35 mixed (a combination of the two)' (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016). Among the cultural sites there are more than 175 urban ensembles, not to mention an approximately equal number of specific urban quarters and/or monuments. In its most recent survey (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016) urban ensembles are characterized by such labels as 'historic centre', 'walled city', 'historic city', 'old town', 'historic ensemble', and 'historical complex'. It is self-evident that these paraphrases of UNESCO's cultural sites are based on aspects of urban morphology: horizontal and vertical appearances, street patterns, functional differentiation of traditional urban fabric and aspects of urban growth in a historical perspective. And included, of course, are architectural and cultural monuments or ensembles, as well as the emotional associations for the inhabitants and the region. As such, they are 'unique and irreplaceable properties' of mankind, as they are living testimonies of the past.

Cities and urban centres are nodal points of change. And they have always been. Nowadays, however, globalization changes so much. And it happens with accelerating speed. Changing skylines, changing ground plans, and changing building materials are expressions of rapid global change. Too often, these global changes coincide with the neglect and deterioration of traditional urban centres and their historically grown forms and functions. What then are the 175 or 200 historical centres worldwide that fall under the preservation and conservation rules of UNESCO? Can 'the harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world', referred to in the Convention preamble, really be counter-balanced by the protection of a few sites?

Without discrediting UNESCO's endeavours to function as a model and pace-setter, one has to stress the fact that on a worldwide scale there are thousands of historical urban landscapes in all parts of the world. They

deserve protection, conservation and restoration as unique ensembles of their specific history and culture. They are beacons for nation-building and national identity – and they are irreplaceable monuments of cultural diversity in our increasingly and uniformly globalizing world. Unfortunately, protection, conservation, preservation and, even more, restoration are costly. Global players may have the financial means to engage in such endeavours; other countries and especially those with low GDPs and high population growth rates surely have other priorities. Thus UNESCO's Convention has its limitations.

### ***Urban Morphology: an academic alternative and complement?***

Beyond the aforementioned initial article by Moudon (1997), the editorials in successive issues of *Urban Morphology* by its editor J.W.R. Whitehand contain many thoughtful suggestions of how to broaden the journal's scope and functions and how to increase its visibility and the applicability of its published research. A characteristic statement is perhaps that in volume 8 (1) in which the editor states: 'The number of papers offered has burgeoned, but case studies dominate; and too few of them are driven by, or benefit from, concepts of general, or at least wide, significance' (Whitehand, 2004, p. 1). The focus on case studies is surely not objectionable. However, these studies should go beyond pure description and stocktaking. They should be embedded in broader contexts and/or in discussions of preservation and historical significance, perhaps even in line with UNESCO's World Heritage programme.

The editorial comments in each issue of *Urban Morphology* also contain many innovative ideas and suggestions of how to improve the visibility, relevance and acceptance of the journal as a bridge-builder between theory and practice, and between research and application (see, for example, the editorials to volumes 15 (2), p. 95 (Whitehand, 2011) and 19 (2), pp. 115–16 (Whitehand, 2015), and, in more detail, Whitehand (2012,

pp. 55–65)). And, very fortunately, in recent years the potential for close co-operation between the journal and UNESCO has gained momentum. Significant contributions are by, among many others, Levy (1999, 2005) and Samuels (2013). Outstanding is UNESCO's World Heritage 'historic urban landscape initiative' (van Oers, 2010, Jokilehto, 2010), to which also an urban morphologist (Whitehand, 2010) was invited to contribute. The latter's retrospective view of this event is, however, extremely sobering:

Five years on ... there seems little ground for optimism that significantly improved morphological bases for urban conservation are likely to be widely adopted in the near future. And this far from optimistic prospect applies to both the historic urban landscapes for which UNESCO has a decision-making role and the wide range of historical urban landscapes that contribute collectively to shaping human environments much more widely under the aegis of national and local government (Whitehand, 2015, p. 115).

Beyond these explicit pleas for co-operation in theoretical discussions and practical applications there are many additional ideas and suggestions to bridge the gaps between theory and practice and between the Convention and the vision and mission of *Urban Morphology*. The journal's commendable structure, with short yet inspiring viewpoints, reports, book reviews, notes and notices, offers additional and sometimes very straightforward strategies. This observation holds true also for the relationships between ISUF, this journal and the mission and vision of UNESCO's Convention. In this context, especially in recent issues of *Urban Morphology*, several viewpoints expressed explicit pleas for stronger interactions between theory and practice as well as between research and UNESCO. Remarkable viewpoints with clear suggestions of closer co-operation are those by Palaiologou (2017) and Song *et al.* (2016, 2017). Also the editorial comment in volume 19 (2) by Whitehand (2015, pp. 115–6) is a noteworthy attempt to reconcile endeavours that belong together.

### **National and local responses: beyond the Convention and *Urban Morphology***

Before drawing some conclusions and coming forward with suggestions for improved contacts and co-operation between UNESCO and the worldwide active community of urban morphologists, it is necessary to draw attention to 'third parties' involved in urban morphological research and practice: national, regional and local institutions and actors.

As a matter of fact there are many commendable activities in the shadow of UNESCO's global and often politically motivated decisions. And on the whole they are probably much more numerous and effective than those by globally or multi-nationally acting bodies. In Germany, for example, the Federal Government had passed in 1971 the so-called *Städtebauförderungsgesetz*. This legislation has several foci of political action, commonly shared by the Federal Government and the corresponding ministries of Germany's sixteen states in co-operation with local communities, namely cities, towns and even villages. Two of the five major programmes are:

- 'the promotion and revitalization of urban centres and their nineteenth-century fringes in need of maintenance and/or replacement' (Förderung von erneuerungsbedürftigen, zumeist älteren Stadtkernen und Gründerzeitstadtteilen); and
- 'the support of measures of protection of monuments in historic town centres' (städttebaulicher Denkmalschutz in historischen Stadtkernen).

The results of this legislation are impressive. Hundreds of historical urban centres, sites and quarters have been and continue to be preserved, restored and/or protected. Maintenance of urban form is one of the paramount guiding principles. Federal legislation has been and is supported and/or accompanied by a number of related and often complementary activities. One of them is the Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz, founded in 1985. To date, this largest private foundation to save, restore or rejuvenate urban and rural monuments of historical or cultural value has financially supported more than 5000 individual

objects, some of them embedded in larger urban restoration projects.

Germany is of course by no means the only example of national measures – governmentally or privately sponsored – in the field of the preservation of inherited historically and culturally outstanding urban form. The frequent reporting of ‘studies of urban form’ is one of *Urban Morphology*’s trademarks and provides ample potential for sharing of information and networking. State-of-the-art reports cover Spain (vol. 2.1), France (2.2), the United States (5.1), Italy (6.2), Germany (8.1 and 11.1), Canada (10.1), Australia (10.2), Great Britain (10.2), Japan (12.1), Ireland (12.1), Sweden (13.2), Turkey (14.1), Poland (14.2), Portugal (15.1), South Korea (16.2), Brazil (18.2) and the Netherlands (20.1). These overviews, many of them to some extent pleas for ‘the study of urban form’ (Oliveira, 2013), are a challenge for practitioners, preservationists and, above all, political decision-makers. Could they not be the starting point for concerted actions on national scales? And *Urban Morphology*, with its explicit mission to serve as a communicator both on an international and interdisciplinary scale, could be a kind of link and bridge-builder between theory and practice and between local and global.

### **Transferring academic research into political action**

A publication of the German UNESCO-Kommission has the title *Alte Städte sind unsere Heimat (Old cities are our home)* (Rosenthal and Dyroff, 1993). Taking towns of the former German Democratic Republic and comprehensive endeavours of preservation and careful renewal, this booklet reveals the close connection between strategies and impacts of UNESCO’s global responsibilities and local, regional, or national states’ performances.

The same observations hold true for the aims and goals of this journal. A review of the first 20 volumes of *Urban Morphology* reveals an impressive number of studies and a wealth

of information on different aspects of urban form and their importance in terms of historical uniqueness, cultural diversity and human wellbeing. It is against this background that the journal attempts to be a gathering place with ‘its principal aim of advancing international and interdisciplinary research’ with scope for comparisons both within countries and between cultural areas and ‘bridging from the most quantitative extremes of the social sciences to the most qualitative of the arts and humanities’ (Whitehand 1997, p. 1). To this can be added the point made by Moudon (1997, p. 7), also in the inaugural issue of *Urban Morphology*, that ‘urban form can only be understood historically’.

Thus there is remarkable accordance between the aims and goals of this journal and those of the UNESCO Convention of 1972. The major difference between the two is the fact that *Urban Morphology* is a scientific and academic journal devoted to basic research, whereas the Convention is a predominantly political instrument. The decisions and actions of UNESCO are application-oriented and have lasting effects with regard to the protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage sites. Since urban ensembles, urban quarters and monuments are prominent among those Convention properties, the topics addressed by urban morphologists are basic constituents of a great many listed urban properties. The very fact that the journal itself has referred to World Heritage matters on several occasions speaks for itself. All these observations hold true for the congruence between perspectives evident in *Urban Morphology* and the multi-faceted activities of urban historians, planners, architects and historical geographers and those pursuing urban preservation at local and regional levels.

The question arises as to the potential for increased exploitation of the linkage between basic research on urban form, on the one hand, and the incorporation of its results in political action. It is true that co-operation already exists in at least a few cases. However, the potential for closer co-operation could be used to the benefit of both sides.

## Conclusion

A number of suggestions follow from this discussion. The main purpose has been to present ideas of how to promote urban morphology as a key component in the expansion of national and international activities in the protection, conservation and preservation of historical urban form and fabric. Basic to this approach is the bridging of the gap between academic research and its application, and to move urban morphology into a more central position in this regard. Accordingly, it is suggested that the following ideas are worthy of consideration:

1. Would it not make sense to co-ordinate information about the theory and practice of urban morphological research in different research communities (geographers, architects, historians and planners, to mention examples) on national scales in a more systematic manner? Could *Urban Morphology* not serve as a mediator by offering a specific section in each issue of the journal for regular and up-to-date reports? The state-of-the-art reports referred to earlier could serve as a starting point for such an endeavour.
2. Such an initiative could ultimately lead to the foundation of national associations of integrative urban research and planning where they do not already exist. Such a step would not only strengthen the coherence and interrelationship of different disciplines concerned with urban research, but also help to create a kind of corporate identity within national contexts.
3. Equally important is the creation of networks at both interdisciplinary and international scales. Networking means not only the exchange of innovative ideas and practices beyond disciplinary boundaries, but also the transfer and adaptation of successful applications in the fields of urban morphology beyond national boundaries and experiences.
4. Based on such developments it is highly desirable that the community of urban morphologists (in the broadest sense of the word!) seeks to establish close ties

with those political decision-makers who are responsible in the fields of 'protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural ... heritage'. Local and regional co-operations between theory and practice, and between research and application, are the basis for a stronger involvement of academia in local and national decision-making processes concerned with the presentation of historical urban centres, their conservation and careful modernization. Such a demand goes hand in hand with the Convention's explicit demands articulated in its Article 5.

5. The ultimate aim would be close international and interdisciplinary co-operation both between urban morphologists and between them and the large international programmes on the rescue of regional urban heritage (for example within the European Union) and even on a world scale (Convention; UNESCO, 1972). A precondition of such a visionary outlook would, however, be the idealistic enthusiasm and unselfish engagement of a broad international and interdisciplinary community of urban morphologists, which is not only well organized but willing to bridge the gap between research and application.

There is of course an element of wishful thinking in this perspective. However, it is consistent with ISUF's unceasing endeavours to serve as a kind of forum for researchers and practitioners alike, with *Urban Morphology* as its main channel of communication. And many scientific and/or professional contributions to this journal deal with the issues that have been raised in this paper. In various forms, quite a few of these, be they editorials, articles, 'viewpoints' or book reviews, include appeals for more effective applications of research results and for closer co-operation with both practitioners and policy-makers. ISUF and the academic research of which it is a spearhead have so much to offer. Greater co-operation would be both meaningful and beneficial for research, practice and policy – at least at local and regional levels. The final step, namely to get academic research in urban morphology involved in the

decision-making processes of international bodies such as UNESCO, may indeed be a large one. But it surely merits serious consideration. The annual conferences of ISUF would be an ideal platform on which to discuss these matters.

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