

# Why study urban morphology? The views of ISUF members

Michael Barke

Department of Geography, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne,  
NE1 8ST, UK. E-mail: michael.barke@northumbria.ac.uk

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**Abstract.** *This paper reports on a survey of ISUF members who were requested to provide succinct answers to the question ‘why is urban morphology an important object of study?’ A meaningful response rate was obtained and, using content analysis, seven major themes were identified. The views expressed on these are presented. It is concluded that there are several important and varied justifications for the study of urban morphology but that any unity of the field is derived from the nature of the subject matter itself rather than from the approach taken to its study.*

*Keywords: studying urban morphology, philosophical basis, practical implications, holistic character, process, aesthetics, heritage, identity*

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This paper will report on the responses of ISUF members to a survey of their views on why urban morphology constitutes an important object of study. The question was stimulated by the author’s participation in a recently published text on teaching urban morphology, specifically a chapter attempting to explain the importance of urban morphology. The survey requested respondents to provide a succinct answer to the question – *how would you explain the importance of studying urban morphology to a ‘lay’ (that is, non-academic) audience in just a few sentences?* The request for brevity was partly for the practical reason of reducing the complexity of dealing with potentially lengthy answers, but it was also a strategy to encourage colleagues to reduce their thoughts to a meaningful compact and coherent structure – hence the request to frame those thoughts as if they were being conveyed to a non-academic audience. To put it simply, the intention was to obtain responses that had been reduced to the bare and important essentials, without numerous qualifications and sub-arguments. Seventy-three responses were obtained. The

purpose here is to present views rather than dissect them.

The paper is structured in relation to the categorization of significant points made by respondents, some of whom restricted themselves to just one major point while others made several observations. Every attempt has been made in what follows to identify the hierarchy of issues as identified by respondents and to separate out the key ‘leading’ theme or themes in each response.

Although there is an awareness of the broad disciplinary membership and appeal of urban morphology as a subject, and the different views and intentions inherent in this diversity (Moudon, 1997) are of interest, an analysis of the responses segmented across this broad spectrum is rather more complicated than may at first be apparent. An initial division could be made between academics and practitioners but these are, of course, not mutually exclusive categorizations. Academic disciplines are also an obvious source of differentiation with the disciplines of architecture and geography being well recognized within the urban morphology field, but also present are planners

(and not just town planners), urban (and landscape) designers, and historians, along with other 'urban' scholars. A further distinction relates to the locations of respondents. However, many have moved several times in the course of their careers and the pursuit of this aspect has not been attempted.

Subjecting the responses to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) produced nine categories or groups of answers (Table 1). Only one respondent expressed a view that urban morphology was of limited importance. At the other extreme 48 per cent made reference to 'people' in the context of the importance of urban morphology, most often the human response to urban form at a variety of scales. However, this was almost always a passing reference and was usually subsumed under one of the other seven categories. It is the latter, therefore that are interpreted as the key themes that, in the opinion of this group of ISUF members, justify urban morphology as a worthwhile field of academic study. These may be described as philosophy, practice, process, aesthetics, heritage, identity and holism.

### Philosophy

A small minority of respondents chose to frame their perspective in philosophical or predominantly abstract theoretical terms. The request to provide the reasons for studying urban morphology in terms comprehensible to the 'lay person' undoubtedly explains why this was such a small minority. Nevertheless, the views expressed are of interest, especially in the context of discussions on the philosophical position of urban morphology (Conzen, 1998; Gerosa, 1999; Mugavin, 1999).

For one commentator, the philosophical basis of urban morphology is situated firmly within the interactions between humankind and the earth's surface, a key aspect of which is their 'spatial form, which is always three-dimensional and made by 'fulls' and 'empties', by the land and water on which they rest and rise. In fact, through spatial form we can read and understand or hypothesize how mankind's desires, conflicts, struggles,

**Table 1. Key themes in the importance of urban morphology as an object of study**

Theme	Respondents identifying in %
Philosophy	4.1
Practice	38.4
Process	16.4
Aesthetics	8.2
Heritage	19.2
Identity	35.6
Holism	16.4
People	47.9

relationships, activities and values do transfer and insert themselves in the earth's surface. We can also use it in order to contribute to the realization of a better world.' In this view, urban morphology sits in a pivotal intellectual and interpretive position in the interplay of the natural and human worlds and represents the physical outcomes of this interaction.

A similar but slightly less abstract philosophical justification focused on the cultural dimension – 'spatial and physical realities manifest the experience of the populations that have produced and inhabited them. As such, they testify to the engagement of social groups with each other as well as with the inherited built forms and their associated cultural models. The built space is a deep cultural form, that denotes cultural habits, religious beliefs as well as social, family and gender relationships, and that is informed by a geographic context and a culturally situated building tradition. In consequence, ... the built space is an imprint of culture and a palimpsest. It's their differing conditions of production that confer each city its own physiognomy. The built space provides invaluable insights on how we have inhabited the world. It is an unparalleled expression of the human experience.'

In contrast to these 'human-environment' perspectives, a somewhat different philosophical justification for the importance of urban morphology concerned agency and causality, intriguingly reflecting M. R. G. Conzen's 'Notes on urban morphology' (Whitehand, 2004), 'the agent may be personalized as

architect, urban planner and so on, but may also be reduced to an anonymous art, technique or field of knowledge (urban design, applied urban geography...). The city has the form it has, because of the actual state of the art in urban planning. Urban morphology commits itself to the thesis that urban design itself is a genetic process, which becomes continuously enriched by new discoveries about the causal parameters intervening in urban growth. Urban morphology confronts the praxis of urban design with the scientific exploration of urban growth.'

Whilst not necessarily presenting contradictory philosophical perspectives, these responses, asserting the primacy of a philosophical dimension as a reason for studying urban morphology, are clearly divergent and, as such, add weight to the argument of Gerosa (1999, p. 45) that it is probably not 'possible to find a common philosophical basis that could play the role of an adopted platform for all urban morphological research'. Indeed, many of the responses cited below reflect particular philosophical approaches, but these were linked to more specific justifications for the field of urban morphology.

## Practice

Along with 'holism' and narrowly ahead of 'process', 'practice' was the most numerically significant category of answers with 38 per cent of respondents making direct reference to this justification for urban morphology. Furthermore, a similar proportion made indirect or implied reference to the 'applicability' of urban morphology. This is not surprising, as the creation of an ISUF Task Force to specifically examine this issue reflected growing interest in the relationship between research and practice (Samuels, 2013). A typical observation was that urban morphology 'helps us to preserve, restore or renew the character of a city... it also helps us to plan what a city should look like in the future'. Although relatively straightforward and, in some ways, apparently simple, such an observation clearly implies an ambitious agenda. A little more

specific is the suggestion that urban morphology 'establishes a language and tools as bases for understanding existing urban form as well as for the purpose of planning and design', and 'urban morphology teaches us how cities grow and decline – which helps those who live in, plan, build, or manage cities to create better places'. For some therefore, the discipline of urban morphology could be described as 'an operative asset for the understanding of cities and their history/evolution and for the discussion of urban plans/renewals'.

More directly, urban morphology as 'method' is highlighted overtly in the following: 'urban morphology provides a rigorous but flexible method (one could even say language) to describe and understand the urban landscape. Its strengths in this regard are linking forms with the process that led to their formation and a focus on how urban landscapes change.' Furthermore, 'we have to consider urban morphology as a tool, a means to an end. It helps us to read and understand a settlement through schemes and patterns but these simplify the complexity and reality of a settlement, of its architectural features, of its urban form, of its historical and social dynamics. Urban morphology is one of the most important tools we can use to know how a settlement has stratified and modified.' In even more specific terms 'another benefit of the study of urban morphology is the possibility to read and check not only typological models but also building techniques and solutions; the position of buildings in a settlement, especially if considered in the historic fabric, involves specific solutions that we can choose to preserve'. Such comments reflect the tacit consensus that, in a variety of ways, urban morphology provides a route to better intervene in the process of urban development as it impacts upon urban forms. Put succinctly, 'we can critically choose between continuity and discontinuity with the past. In this regard urban morphology is basic to detect the coherence of an urban modification.'

Whilst the request for brevity of responses checked the provision of details on precisely how various forms of intervention could or

should be established and utilized, the direction of thought of several respondents is indicated by the following: (urban morphology) ‘allows us to study the evolution or erosion of built form and public space (and the relationship between them), and to improve our practice as designers, in allowing for a deep understanding of the spatial context within which we are working’. Thus, for some, although still stressing the practical application of urban morphology, the subject is less about the provision of a specific set of applicable skills or methodologies and more about deepening understanding and comprehension with the implication that this is a sensitising process that is likely to ultimately lead to better forms of intervention – ‘if we better understand ... then we can make more informed (and hopefully better) decisions about the future of our cities’. Similarly, ‘urban morphology offers an important understanding into how cities are formed and change over time, thus providing very particular information that can advance how we can better manage urban change’.

On a rather different tack, for some the usefulness of urban morphology lay with its role as a teaching device, in that it ‘provides many insights into city growth and change, which I find very useful in teaching the city designers of tomorrow’. This perspective is one shared by a number of respondents, not surprisingly mainly those concerned with urban design education. For example, ‘I ... would argue that the ‘why’ (*that is, ‘why study urban morphology?’*) is methodological, a lens and a means to design. We study and teach urban morphology topics as a means to understand, analyse, compare and, for some, generate urban scaled spatial pattern and structure.’ However, the ‘practical’ reasons for studying urban morphology also clearly merged with other dimensions or facets identified by respondents, especially the role of the subject in stressing a holistic approach to the study of towns and cities as it ‘provides the means to look deeply at the fabric of a town, it includes the layout of street and alleyway, the size and shape of the blocks as well as the age, appearance and

use of buildings. **Thus it is more embracing than any other method employed by single discipline groups** (*my emphasis*), such as highway departments or architects, revealing the links between different parts of a town, its historical development and how such information might be used to plan future development. Such a holistic approach is necessary if architects, developers and town planners are to produce distinctive towns, true to their roots and with a distinctive sense of place. Urban morphology should therefore form an essential platform in the training of all involved.’

A further, rather specific interpretation of the practical utility of urban morphology was identified by several respondents. This is concerned with the subject’s relationship to sustainability issues, in the widest sense. It ‘shows that urban form has much to do with how we live, work and play in more sustainable and healthy ways’. In addition, ‘in designing and developing space the potential for social and environmental sustainability becomes determined’. Indeed, one observer is convinced that the growing significance of sustainability issues provides a major opportunity for urban morphology and its ‘tools for reading the city’ – ‘their application to urban design and landscape, such as complex organisms in which all other ‘dimensions’ of human life are included ... remained at the margin of those experiences, and only now, thanks to the irruption of the sustainable topics, it begins to appear as a real search path’.

‘If we are to plan sustainable cities for the future, we should study the long-lasting cities of the past, so that we know what we do today will be useful in centuries to come. Most importantly, we must be careful not to cut off the possibility of future change.’ In similar vein – ‘it is noticeable that in the process of urbanization, transformation of the landscape occurs through construction and degradation. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate the environmental impacts related to the urban form, since only forms that are adapted to the ground on which they stand can remain throughout space and time ... morphological studies, allied to environmental approaches,

represent a fruitful way of understanding the city in its contemporaneous complexity.’

### Holism

Brief mention has already been made of the holistic role of urban morphology and one of the most striking features of the responses provided in the context of the subject’s rounded approach was the frequency with which the analogy between the city and the human body was mentioned. One forthright view is that ‘surgeons are required to study thoroughly anatomy before they can put their hands into a human’s body to heal it, in the same way architects, planners and designers should study urban morphology before they are allowed to put their hands into the city to change it’. ‘In medicine, knowledge of the physical state and workings of the body are considered prerequisites to diagnosis and intervention, so I tend to emphasise that both body and city are complex living entities, requiring close and systematic scrutiny of structure and life process in advance of proposing change.’ A similar interpretation is provided by this respondent – ‘would you trust a surgeon who makes medical interventions if he (*sic*) doesn’t know anything about human anatomy? The same question applies when we address the problem of interventions in urban forms, the only discipline or key to help you understand and to know how to intervene on a complex object made by a collectivity of human beings through time ... is urban morphology.’ Several respondents expressed similar views and clearly were comfortable with a broad, all-embracing conception of urban morphology of the type advocated by Kropf: ‘far from seeking to impose a strict separation of sub-disciplines, I strongly advocate a catholic, inclusive and collaborative approach’ (Kropf, 2014, p. 72).

But for others the appeal of urban morphology does not need to be justified in terms of ‘needing to know the **whole** in order to intervene’ and its inherent holistic character is sufficient. Thus ‘urban form helps us to identify/recognize/apprehend buildings,

streets, squares, villages, cities and territories for an integrated way of living in the challenging contemporary world’ and ‘a future city will not be successful unless it has high-performing urban form that is socially, environmentally and economically accountable. Urban morphology can contribute to the success of future cities.’ ‘The city is a complex organism in which all the aspects of everyday life are mirrored. To be able to understand and keep together all these features is of the utmost importance. Urban morphology thus becomes the platform on which to place naturally all networks that make the contemporary society.’

Although usually couched in terms of its all-embracing inclusivity, for some the holistic nature of urban morphology as an object of study lies in its ability to emphasize dimensions often overlooked by other disciplines. For example, ‘urban morphology relativizes the exclusive role of human agency in the production of urban forms and tries to identify which other parameters are to be taken into account. One of these parameters is past forms (past road networks, past plot systems, past distributive layouts, past pieces of urban fabric, past pieces of urban infrastructure). So, at the core of urban morphology we find a study of the dialectics between past forms and emerging new forms.’ This perspective provides a strong echo of the view expressed by Moudon (1997, p. 9) that ‘urban morphology approaches the city not as artefact, but as organism, where the physical world is inseparable from the processes of change to which it is subjected’.

### Process

A group of responses chose to specifically highlight the role of urban morphology in revealing processes of change. However, these were mainly interpreted in general terms rather than the specific, formal morphological processes identified by Conzen (2004). For the survey respondents the interpretation of ‘process’ took two main forms. For some it is concerned with the relationships between the

city and people – ‘how cities and urban areas differ from each other and what are the consequences that come up from form and spatial organization in their daily life’. For others, the interpretation of ‘process’ is even broader, in some cases nothing less than illuminating the progress of civilization itself. However, one exception that is very much in accord with the view of Kropf and Malfroy (2013) that ‘the task of urban morphology is to specialize in the analysis of morphogenetic processes’ is the observation that ‘urban morphology is the study of how urban form is shaped, first from the physical elements which are: the street network, the city blocks and the parcels that are in between the streets, and the buildings that sit atop them. Then there are the activities that take place and these can be the land uses assigned for the parcels, or the uses of the buildings – sometimes, depending on the context, even different floors or sides of the building might have different uses. It is this complexity of interactions between ‘shape’ and ‘human activities’ ... that is at the core of understanding urban morphology.’

In relation to the first broad perspective on the relationship between city and people is the view that ‘through the study of the urban morphology we can better understand the urban fabric that facilitates and regulates daily life within neighbourhoods, towns and cities’. So, ‘we need to study urban forms, including the design, formation and transformation of cities and neighbourhoods because they directly and indirectly impact our physical and mental health and quality of life’. ‘The character of ... urban environments is fundamental to people’s physical and mental health. It influences their sense of what is around them, both locally and much farther away.’ In a slightly more philosophical vein, ‘the production of the material environment mediates social relations. The various spatial and physical realities manifest the experience of the populations that have produced and inhabited them. As such, they testify to the engagement of social groups with each other as well as with the inherited built forms and their associated cultural models.’ The form of settlements ‘structures and facilitates (enables

and restricts) opportunities for, and routes to, interaction and encounter between people and situates (affords and affects) people in space’. ‘Cities provide the framework for the lives of billions of people, and the ways in which cities support human lives include issues related to their physical organization. Urban morphology provides an approach to understanding the physical organization of cities that is essential to human and social life.’

‘We experience the cities we live in both physically and mentally. While our mental interactions with the city are prisoners of our minds, the physical reality of the city exists outside of us and is a fact to be accepted for what it is.’ ‘The urban forms we see around us are the most immediate expression of that encounter, and influence our ability to navigate, make larger sense of, and derive appreciation (even enjoyment) of the city.’ The majority of the views expressed above indicate a broad agreement with Conzen’s (2013) definition of urban morphology, including matters such as the cultural meaning of built forms. This is broader than the view of Kropf and Malfroy (2013, p. 130) namely that ‘urban morphology should not be concerned with meaning but with the formal characteristics of the elements of urban form’.

The second broad interpretation of ‘process’ is well represented by the view that ‘urban morphology offers a conduit to see, analyse, and explain the physical structures of the built environment. Moreover it grants opportunity to grasp the process of their transformation and evolution across time’, in so doing obtaining a deeper comprehension of the factors that influence civilization within urban locales. ‘As such, alongside other genres ... urban morphology is a window to recognize the history and development of civilization in urban settings.’ More prosaically, urban morphology is ‘the three-dimensional shape of a city; it is its form produced by the relationship of buildings, open spaces, infrastructures and natural elements. The study of urban form is of extreme importance because it can help explain several urban processes, for example how a city has changed in the past and how it may change in the future.’

A more 'practice' oriented response is that 'few non-academics and academics accept the relevance of the derivative process of new ideas from old ones. Notwithstanding, I do not underestimate this topic, I do think the merit of urban morphology is that of elucidating the material process of transformation of existing structures *as a source of inspiration* for the architect and the urban designer.' This view is clearly very much in accord with the second of the three 'schools' of urban morphological investigation noted by Moudon (1997, p. 8), namely that 'the study of urban form for *prescriptive* purposes' is a central aim of urban morphology.

In similar vein, urban morphology 'allows the acknowledgement and understanding of the formation and transformation of cities, through the investigation of form. The great contribution offered by urban morphology is that it offers the possibility of reading the urban landscape and provides methods which allow us to reconstitute the formative and transformative process of the city.' This is reinforced by the view that 'urban forms and patterns ... can tell us things that might not be revealed by other more direct means: so by studying abstract urban patterns, perhaps tracked over time, we can gain insights into 'what happened' and 'how things work', that we might not otherwise understand, from simply observing the street-eye view 'here and now', or by simply scrutinising the motives or stated actions of individual actors.'

### **Aesthetics**

For many scholars and perhaps more 'lay' individuals, the subject matter of urban morphology is inherently linked to questions of aesthetics. Many aspects of urban form evoke sensory responses and, whilst not all of these are positive, in most cultures there is an appreciation of the presence of beauty in objects and landscapes. Perhaps surprisingly therefore this dimension had only limited recognition by the majority of responses. However, where it was recognized, it was in very strong

terms – sufficient to warrant its identification here as a separate dimension.

One writer reminded us of the bold statement of Mumford (1945, p. 5) that the city 'with language itself remains man's greatest work of art'. Whilst this is not a direct implication that aesthetics are an integral part of cities, the use of the word 'art' implies a sensory experience, even if not necessarily one of beauty. The city and its form evokes affecting responses and this therefore should surely be part of urban morphology. So, for one writer urban morphology is 'interpreted mainly from the interactive relationships between people and environment. Harmonious urban forms will make people feel more comfortable not only aesthetically but also technically. A good design of urban form will provide people with a comfortable urban environment, such as friendly public spaces and transport systems.' Similarly, 'in some happy cases, urban forms give us the comfort of beauty, and also for this reason it is important to study them'. And 'the form of our cities or villages helps us to understand their special character, to realize their aesthetic values, or in other cases to find out some functional requirements' ... 'and some problems, in order to resolve them for a better life.'

Other respondents stressed the extent to which the built environment and its various components are 'symbolically loaded', referring to the role of particular buildings or structures in creating an emotive response. This was frequently couched in terms of the historicity of such buildings or structures and the way in which these components can take on a meaning that transcends their original intentions. For several respondents this 'emotional' response to the built environment, as well as being founded upon physical attraction, elided into the historic significance of buildings or townscapes.

### **Heritage**

Although urban morphology has close relationships to urban and architectural history and the study of the past and therefore heritage, it

is perhaps surprising that this aspect was recognized in only 19 per cent of the responses. But, for some, it is fundamental: for example in ‘trying to understand the urban historical narrative of a place’ ... and capitalizing on a community’s sense of its heritage; ‘retaining/re-purposing physical heritage assets; and in ... thinking through urban design for future improvements.’ This linkage between an inherited past and the future evolution of the city was a recurrent theme: ‘especially the study of form of traditional/historic towns and settlements is necessary in order to understand the historic evolution of each place and its special physiognomy and preserve the historic urban web’.

The following straightforward summary typifies a number of responses: ‘cities and towns are the result of a long genesis and a ‘puzzle’ of urban visions and development of different epochs – in Europe from ancient times – until today. Urban morphological structures can be understood by studying and observing them within their historical context.’

A more conceptually based perspective on the same issue is the view that ‘studying urban morphology means to study the evolution of the built environment and of the civilization that created it, according to evolving needs and desires related to political economic and social circumstances. Urban morphology is the pure expression of a society, in a defined context, along a timeline of urban and cultural events that defined its history. Urban morphology is the result of the evolution of mankind, in terms of technological techniques and progress of urban science.’

One respondent argued for the distinctive role of urban morphology in relation to heritage with the view that ‘the physical form of towns embodies stories of their physical, social and cultural past. It often provides evidence that it is not available from any other source’.

A further perspective stressed the role of urban morphology in revealing the built heritage of ‘everyday’ people. ‘The past form of a city is a record of the actions of people in the past, building houses, designing

neighbourhoods and creating urban spaces. Urban morphology is a direct testimony to those actions. A big advantage of the urban morphology approach to the past – in contrast to much of mainline history – is that it reveals the actions and aspects of lives of people who were not kings, dukes, bishops or elites.’

A reassuring feature of the comments made on the relationship of heritage and urban morphology therefore, was the recognition of the distinction between ‘heritage’ as actually experienced by people using places and developing a ‘sense of place’ on the one hand, and people concerned with attempting to create a deliberate heritage-related ‘sense of place’ on the other (Jivén and Larkham, 2003). There was a clear consensus stressing the importance of the former, echoing the perspectives developed in work such as that by Jones *et al.* (2017).

## Identity

Identity was the third most significant theme identified and it is clear that, for many respondents, the relationship of urban morphology to ‘identity’ is the most important factor. This is a slightly surprising result as there are not many recently published papers in mainstream urban morphology that explicitly relate to identity, even though it is often implicit. But ‘we shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us’ is a sentiment underlying many responses. Indeed, this theme gave rise to some of the strongest and most deeply felt comments. ‘Urban form is a visual manifestation of different cultures and a holistic accumulation of human civilization. To know its visual character, historical background and building tradition is to know its people and society from which we learn about the world as well as ourselves.’ Responses reflected general agreement with early research, such as that by Proshansky (1978). In this interpretation urban morphology is as much about the identity of the self as it is about others.

In broader terms, several respondents discussed the role of urban morphology in helping people ‘experience’ the city in several ways. One of these is in relation to the physical

character of the city. 'We experience the cities we live in both physically and mentally. While our mental interactions with the city are prisoners of our minds, the physical reality of the city exists outside of us and is a fact to be accepted for what it is and understood. The urban forms we see around us are the most immediate expression of that encounter, and influence our ability to navigate, make larger sense of, and derive appreciation and enjoyment of the city.'

Urban morphology 'influences how people connect with the past, since cities are made of physical structures, especially buildings and a variety of kinds of spaces, many of which were created by earlier generations of people. Urban morphology is about these varied urban environments – how they came into being, what they are like physically, and how they affect people.' The key point being made here is how different aspects of urban morphology relate to identity. However, it is clear that 'identity' is interpreted in two main ways. One is concerned with the relationship just mentioned, that is how urban form has an impact on people's identity in relation to place. The second relates to the identity of the place (town or city) itself, and how this is created by the various components of urban morphology. 'Urban morphology is a discipline that allows students to recognize regional identity.' More directly, if somewhat idealistically, 'the local identity of places rises from specific local patterns of building. Morphology seeks to see these patterns so that the rootedness we depend on in places can be preserved and cultivated.' 'The built space is a deep cultural form, that denotes cultural habits, religious beliefs as well as social, family and gender relationships, and that is informed by a geographic context and a culturally situated building tradition. It's their differing conditions of production that confer on each city its own physiognomy. The built space provides invaluable insights on how we have inhabited the world. It is an unparalleled expression of the human experience.' Continuing this theme, urban morphology 'helps communicate the particular qualities of places to scholars and policy makers who may have little knowledge or sensitivity to these qualities – being often more concerned with more abstract socio-economic questions.'

Furthermore, 'urban morphology helps us (and our urban planners) to recognize the uniqueness of each city, the importance of local history and culture for the character of place, and the exact physical structures carrying this character and the embedded meanings for the people'.

The following quotations emphasize the latter dimension of identity, that is the way that people find at least part of their identity through their interactions with the built environment and its morphological features. Thus, 'urban morphology can be a helpful tool for a 'lay' audience to better understand the place where they live', and 'some unique characters of urban forms in a place will make people have the strong sense of belonging'.

Part of the issue of identity relates to links to the past, so for some people the character of the urban environment 'influences their sense of what is around them, both locally and much farther away. It influences how people connect with the past, since cities are made of physical structures, especially buildings and a variety of kinds of spaces, many of which were created by earlier generations of people.' But independently of the past, 'urban form is a visual manifestation of different cultures and a holistic accumulation of human civilization. To know its visual character, historical background and building tradition is to know its people and society from which we learn about the world as well as ourselves.' And similarly, 'urban morphology is important because it helps us improve our understanding of our most extensive and long lasting creations – our cities and settlements. It helps us to understand them as our habitat – how it works to meet our needs; as cultural artefacts – repositories of history, meaning and knowledge.'

## Conclusion

It must be conceded that the stipulation that responses should be couched in terms suitable for a 'lay' audience will have had some impact on the nature of the observations provided. However, whilst it is possible that a request for less constrained answers may have produced more sophisticated terminology it seems most

unlikely to have elicited a completely different set of categories. There are grounds for confidence that the responses reported here do represent the views of a significant number of ISUF members on the justification for urban morphology as a field of study.

One respondent articulated the aim of urban morphology succinctly. 'It is to answer three questions: what the urban form is like, why the urban form is like that, and then how could we make the urban form better for people.' This provides a succinct conclusion to this report. Yet, clearly, this simple statement hides a multiplicity of issues. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the survey reported on here produced such wide-ranging responses. Despite the apparent consensus on the role of urban morphology in relation to identity, in most other dimensions, urban morphology means different things to different people, reflecting their different specializations within the discipline (Kropf, 2014). To some this is a weakness, to others it is a strength and Gerosa (1999, p. 45), for example, has argued that a common philosophical basis providing a platform for all urban morphological research would be costly through 'transforming ISUF into an association governed by a single doctrine. ISUF is founded on the unity of the problem that it investigates, not on unity of interpretation.' It is clear that the views of ISUF members reported here are strongly in accord with this opinion.

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