



VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Italian urban morphology: the geographical perspective of Umberto Toschi

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In Italy most current research and discussion about urban form occurs in the fields of architecture and urban design. However, even if the role played by urban geography and urban history has never been dominant, it is worth noting that, starting in the 1930s, there was also an Italian tradition of historical-geographical studies that offered some early contributions to the study of urban form.

Gian Luigi Maffei in his viewpoint on 'The historic-geographical approach to urban form' (Maffei, 2009, pp. 133-4) notes the work of the 'Italian school of geography'. He emphasizes the similarity between that school and both the Caniggian school and the Conzenian school, referring to Renato Biasutti and his study *Casa rurale in Toscana* (1938). He describes how the founder of the Florentine school of geographers constructed models of the different characteristics of rural buildings and performed a typomorphological analysis, similar to that used today by the Caniggian School. However, Maffei makes no mention of an earlier geographical tradition of urban analysis with a morphological emphasis.

The strength of the geographical approach to urban morphology is that it offers a comprehensive approach to the elements of the townscape, namely town plan, building fabric and land and building utilization, that exist in a complex areal composition. Moreover, it seeks to identify the physical and social processes that create the form complexes and the spatial patterns they produce.

Any consideration of a geographical perspective

on urban morphology in Italy must start by mentioning the work of Umberto Toschi. Regarded as the father of Italian urban geography and the premier representative of the Bolognese school within the discipline, he has been described as a paragon of Italian geography, a profession which he lived and promoted with deep and passionate engagement both within academia and his civilian life (Zabbini, 2010, p. 93). In the words of Giacomo Corna Pellegrini and Maria Chiara Zerbi (1983, p. 357), 'it was the work of Umberto Toschi that advanced the nature of Italian urban geography most prior to 1948, which influenced the orientation of work very considerably for a long period (1933-1966)'. During his career he laid the foundation for the geographical study of cities in Italy, giving it an explicit morphological character. Indeed, he went so far as to equate urban geography with urban morphology, which he considered to be the 'analytical branch' of the field.

In his first work, *Studi di morfologia urbana* Toschi (1933) demonstrated his analytical approach: he recognized such concepts as the 'urban cell' and its 'building fabric', the 'urban district', the street system and the configuration of the city's boundaries. In describing how the city evolves spatially, he studied the city systematically. In so doing he tried to identify common processes of urban development, and the features that characterize the city and its constituent cells in relation to topographical, historical, economic, and human conditions (Toschi, 1933, p. 3). He

introduced the following concepts: 'ribbon development' (*propaggini*), 'detached urban extension' (*gemmazioni*), 'dispersion' (*disseminazione*) and 'assimilation' (*assimilazione*). His analysis involved two stages: the first, analytical, in which he identified areas occupied by a 'single urban object or function' and where several objects coexisted; the second, synthetic, in which the various geographical quarters were defined. The approach he introduced was known as the 'organization of internal urban spaces' (*organizzazione degli spazi endourbani*) and was based on examination of the contemporary urban organism, the city, and justifications in history and the land (Toschi, 1933, p. 16).

Contrary to his contemporary, Renato Biasutti, Toschi never adopted the individual building and its plot as the basic unit of analysis, nor did he develop the concept of type within his analysis of the city's configuration. The city itself, with its 'functions' and 'objects', considered historically, was the 'only' object of investigation. With this orientation, Toschi's approach can be considered as a primitive phase in the study of urban morphology, conducted with a strong emphasis on the identification of internal city functions. Geographical urban morphology, as a distinct perspective within the overall field of urban morphology, is particularly concerned with the systematic analysis of the internal character and spatial composition of the fabric of entire urban areas. Toschi's method reflects this emphasis. However, he did not really probe the transformations of the city's physical fabric, far less its historical stratification, focusing more on general processes of historical evolution.

Toschi's approach was followed by most Italian urban geographers for decades, and gave rise to many monographic studies of Italian towns and cities. But it was seriously challenged in the 1960s owing to the importance it gave to historical description, and the insufficient attention given to emerging problems. As a result, the production of monographs on the city slowed down considerably and new approaches appeared, treating different spatial patterns in the explicitly functional organization of cities. Toschi himself 'redirected' the discipline towards an 'active geography', able to understand the complex issues related to new processes of urbanization that were becoming evident after mid-century (Toschi, 1956).

It was in his article on 'La città regione e i suoi problemi' (Toschi, 1962) that he showed his new approach to the study of the city. Here the 'city' is considered as a 'geographical organism' that originates and develops according to its own laws.

Because this organism is situated within a territory it can be considered a 'geographical region' (Toschi, 1966, p. 183). The 'geographical region' refers to a spatial unit, a part of the earth's surface, an area within which there are identifiable elements that give the urban landscape a particular geographical character. Toschi applied this concept to the city, introducing the definition of city-region to Italian geography as made up of heterogeneous elements and a number of 'urban districts', a spatial unit identified according to specific functional and formal characteristics. The same concept of 'geographical region' was also used by the British geographer M. R. G. Conzen to describe at some length the very different urbanization histories of northern and southern Italy in the context of the many distinct 'historical urbanization regions' of Europe and their consequently differing morphological expressions. An historical urbanization region (*Städte-landschaft*) is any area in which some or all towns have experienced similar historical development in one or several systematic aspects within that area's historical context and geographical situation (Conzen, 2004, p. 203). While Conzen offered an interpretation of historically-derived differences in urban morphological character in Italy at the grand scale, Toschi investigated the concept of city-region at a small scale, the scale of the geographical organism.

In summary, the urban morphology of Toschi, which he conceived as the study of the geography of the city as a whole, was fundamental in establishing a set of concepts and principles that inspired subsequent Italian geographers to explore new directions and analyse new aspects of the city. Moreover, his works contributed to the long-established tradition of geographical urban morphology outside Britain. He deserves recognition for giving voice to an urban morphological strand in Italian studies of the city well before the contributions of the Muratorian/Caniggian school.

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Urbanism, politics and language: the role of urban morphology

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Urbanization is a social and political act. From the building of new towns, urban extensions and suburban sprawl to squatter settlements, gypsy camps and back through de-urbanization of various kinds, building or clearing settlements is essentially taking or losing territory. Even if we are looking at a sanctioned process within a single state or authority, urbanization (or the production of 'housing') remains politically charged and driven primarily by economic concerns.

Because this process is political, it is perhaps naïve to think it would not involve the language of politics; a 'discourse' in which it is more important to be persuasive and get the desired result than to be fastidiously accurate. Which politician, at least in public, would even use the word 'discourse'? Which politician would use the discourse of urban morphology? Would discussion of fringe-belt alienation or repletive absorption help win the argument for pursuing an act of urbanization? Where does urban morphology fit into the bruising realpolitik of territorial claims and urban land economics?

Putting the questions in these extreme terms helps to highlight a quandary faced by urban morphology. The discipline may provide insights into how to plan and manage urban growth and regeneration but does it have a clear and communicable conception of what those insights are? Does it have a language that can engage with people involved in the process of planning and regeneration? At what level is it most appropriate to engage?

Looking a little more closely at a specific example might help shed light on these questions.

Urban growth in the United Kingdom

The combination of an ageing population, a tendency for smaller households, continued immigration and structural limitations in the existing housing stock means there is significant pressure in the UK for urban growth. There is also a publicly acknowledged desire for economic growth and a professional understanding that economic growth involves not just housing but employment, commercial development, social and service infrastructure, and 'green infrastructure'.

The process of bringing land forward for development is driven by a combination of land interests (landowners, promoters or developers) and local government planning. On the one hand, local authorities seek to quantify the demand for the different uses and find the best locations for development. They exclude areas that are significantly constrained (for example land liable to flooding) and invite expressions of interest from landowners/promoters who are willing to put their land forward.

On the other hand, landowners and developers are actively seeking to put land forward into the process, in some cases irrespective of the merits of the land in planning terms. In general, more land is put forward than is required to meet the quantified need so there is competition between landowners, who are all seeking to maximize the value of their land through development.

Over the past 15-20 years, the positive drive for development, in particular housing, has been met with increasing resistance on the part of local residents and their elected representatives at the