



VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Anglophone squint and transatlantic myopia

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Jeremy Whitehand has discussed in two editorial comments in *Urban Morphology* the symptoms of what he identified as anglophone squint (Whitehand, 2003, 2005). My reading of two recent urban design texts suggests the need to broaden this diagnosis. While both books are very wide in their scope, particular attention will be given here to the symptoms they reveal of anglophone squint and the extent to which the field of urban morphology is considered. For comparison, the extent to which these books refer to space syntax, another approach to urban analysis but of mainly anglophone origin, will also be considered. The books also throw light on topics discussed in a very recent editorial in *Urban Morphology* (Whitehand, 2011) and a 'viewpoint' (Kropf, 2011) in the same issue.

Companion to urban design

The first of these publications is a 700-page tome, *Companion to urban design* (Banerjee and Loukatiou-Sideris, 2011). Produced and published in the United Kingdom, it purports to be an 'authoritative and comprehensive companion ... that includes core, foundational, and pioneering ideas and concepts. Such a volume will serve not only the students and future professionals but also the teachers and practitioners of urban design' (p. 2) – a formidable ambition.

The editors are based in the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles respectively. The book

includes 52 chapters organized in nine parts. Of the 58 authors, 43 are based in the United States, four are from Canada, four from Australia, two from the UK and one each from Germany and Italy. Only two of the authors are practitioners, although the bibliographic sketches note that many of the academics claim to be practitioners as well.

The American authors represent a wide range of perspectives and many of them are widely acclaimed contributors to the literature of urban design. But this North American bias leads to significant omissions. It is regrettable that there is a complete absence of any reference to the Conzen - Caniggia nexus in Part 3, despite the fact that this section of the book is devoted to the 'significant body of knowledge that informs the field of urban design [that] is generated from other disciplines' (p. 2) and includes a chapter by a geographer (Ford, 2011). Two of the other authors, Talen and Scheer, are certainly familiar with the field but have made contributions on other topics to this volume. One could argue that perhaps the founding fathers of urban morphology are too esoteric and their influence on the practice of urban design remains regrettably marginal in the anglophone countries. However, even a figure such as Aldo Rossi, on the edge of that nexus (*pace* our Muratorian colleagues) and who was so iconic in the international architectural discourse of the 1980s and who has been widely translated, fails to get a mention anywhere in the volume.

There is another omission which suggests that any anglophone squint is exacerbated by trans-

atlantic myopia. Although Part 4 addresses ‘the technologies and methods that have influenced or even transformed the practice of urban design at various scales’ (p. 3), there is no consideration of space syntax. From an urban design theoretical or practice viewpoint, given the way concepts of space syntax have permeated practice, this is an even more surprising omission than that of urban morphology. This is despite the fact that one of the early chapters points out that a bottom up, incremental approach to urban design ‘would evolve into several important theoretical areas, including new urbanism and space syntax’ (Birch, 2011, p. 18). As might be expected, New Urbanism has one of the longest entries in the index, but this tantalizing citation is the only mention of space syntax. This omission is the more surprising since Carmona, one of the two British contributors, is based in University College London, the academic home of space syntax. He writes on design coding, which is arguably one of the least relevant British contributions to the wider current practice of urban design given its more extensive application elsewhere in modern times.

Anglophone squint is exacerbated by the sole Italian contributor, based in Milan Polytechnic, who chooses to review urban design teaching in English. He makes the assertion that ‘teaching of urban design is mainly done in English’ (Palazzo, p. 46) and moreover ‘urban design’s language, literature, and terminology is mainly in English’ (Palazzo, p. 47). There is no discussion of how the UK’s mainland European neighbours manage to train architects and town planners who handle urban design problems at least as well, or just as badly, as their anglophone counterparts without the benefit of urban design courses in English.

Not all the authors suffer from introversion. For example, Forsyth (2011), in a wide-ranging review of new towns, gives considerable attention to the British contribution as well as referring to other European and Asian experiences, and Fishman traces the shifting post-Haussmann paradigms across Europe and the United States (Fishman, 2011). But these two are accounts of history. It is the accounts of current practice that are so focussed on America.

To be fair, at the end of the book the editors admit to three lacunae. The first is ‘the absence of a comprehensive global perspective’ owing to a primarily North American view and a bias that reflects ‘the English language’s dominance of the relevant literature’ (pp. 687-8). They also confess to neglecting ‘such important areas as historic preservation and urban conservation’ and a failure

‘to address the question of best practice’ or ‘the role of urban design in shaping the built environment of a hot, crowded and endangered planet’ (pp. 687-8). In spite of the eminence of its contributors this *Companion* can hardly be considered to achieve its intention, manifesting as it does both an anglophone squint and a severe condition of transatlantic myopia.

New urbanism and beyond

The defects of the *Companion* are emphasised when comparison is made with another collection of urban design writings (Haas, 2008). This is also a large volume (350 pages) with 61 chapters by 67 authors, 20 of whom are based outside the United States and 17 of whom are professionals (that is, non-academics). It shares five authors with the *Companion to urban design* and while it includes Duany and Calthorpe, two of the founding fathers of New Urbanism, it also presents contributions from such eminent figures as Peter Hall, Jan Gehl, Bill Hillier and Manuel Castells, who are not usually associated with the New Urbanist movement.

Its wider geographical coverage presumably derives from its origins in a conference held in 2004 in the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. While one might dispute the claim on the dust cover that it is ‘the first complete primer on urban design’, in its geographical scope and range of topics it provides a more authoritative and comprehensive companion than the *Companion* itself, despite the fact that its starting point is New Urbanism and that it omits any reference to the wide field of urban morphology.

Conclusion

The lack of consideration of urban morphology in both volumes underlines the point made in the latest *Urban Morphology* editorial, which notes that ‘channels of communication are ill developed between, on the one hand, the research frontier and, on the other, knowledge users’ (Whitehand, 2011, p. 95). It also emphasizes the importance of the questions posed by Kropf (2011) in the same number as to whether urban morphology has ‘a clear and communicable conception’ of its insights and whether it has ‘a language that can engage with people involved in the process of planning and regeneration?’ (p. 157).

With respect to the omission of urban

morphology, perhaps it might be claimed that it is the perceived irrelevance of European urban morphology to urban design practice and theory as seen from the other side of the Atlantic that has led to its exclusion from the *Companion*. That this may be a too simple an explanation is suggested by a similar neglect of space syntax. The omission of any reference to urban morphology in the second volume discussed here is more serious because of its wider coverage. However, given that this work was produced by an American publisher, presumably with an eye to the internal market, it may be that, as with other commodities, the United States market is so large and dominant that products originating from outside are considered to be of minor interest.

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What is an urban morphologist?

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Superficially, the question 'what is an urban morphologist?' seems easy to answer: an urban morphologist is someone engaging in urban morphology! However, though there have for long been definitions of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, much less attention has been given to those who pursue that knowledge. They belong to many different disciplines: architectural history, architecture, art history, geography, history, sociology and urban planning, to name a few. In fact the variety of disciplines gives strength to urban morphology: manifold perspectives are brought together in a broad discourse. Urban morphology gains much, especially methodologically, by encompassing so many kinds of researchers. Indeed it may be seen as a vanguard scientific field, in which interdisciplinary and transnational work was characteristic long before it became fashionable more widely. Let me offer a few amplifications of this characterization.

The attribution 'urban morphologist' should reflect the scope of the work involved: urban form might be described as the result of numerous shaping processes in varying social layers at a given place through time. This description is indicative of the different academic disciplines that engage in urban morphology. It is even more indicative of the fact that urban morphologists encounter a variety of distinct and sometimes antithetical features, such as tangible form and intangible processes, present facts and reconstructions of the past, shared usage and individual creation. Moreover, the object of interest to the urban morphologist is a living phenomenon, comprising the products of a variety of agents and agencies with their varying ideas about life and the city.

At the same time an urban morphologist employs methods and develops techniques that facilitate the description and understanding of past