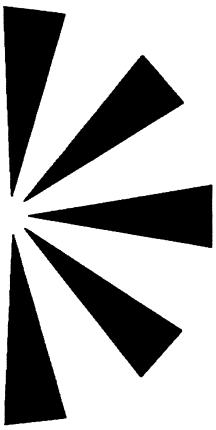

VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Towards consonance in urban form

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> The city … does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lighting rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls (Calvino, 1997, p. 9).

By presenting the past as a repository of the characteristics of urban formation, urban morphology utilizes a knowledge platform as the basis for interpretation of accordant architectural responses (Levy, 1999). Operating within this framework at the scale of architectural features of individual buildings, and imbued with reference to the intrinsic architectural elements of both preceding and existing building forms, micro-morphology (Larkham, 2006, p. 126) provides the efficacy for new architecture that emerges from such a manner of composition.

Research and practice nexus

The primary contribution of urban morphology towards consolidating the link with design is in the analytical processes that deliver an understanding of evolving urban forms; it is, however, a contribution that design practice has yet to widely embrace (Moudon, 1997; Whitehand, 2005).

Research approaches to urban morphology are well established and extensively published, and include concerted efforts to demonstrate the application of theory in practice through both new tools for evaluation, and new methods of design praxis (Hall and Doe, 2000; Hall and Sanders, 2011; McGlynn and Samuels, 2000; Oliveira, 2013).

The gap between research and practice and recommendations as to how it can be narrowed, has been the subject of consistent concern and increasing focus (Hall, 2008, 2013; Kropf, 2011; Marshall and Çalışkan, 2011; Whitehand, 1992, 2007, 2013). A recent issue of *Urban Morphology* contained various opinions on the prevailing stasis. Is it perhaps a problem of differing orientation (Nasser, 2013)? Is it the lack of a common language or developed dialogue (McCormack, 2013; O'Connell, 2013)? Or could it be a result of insufficient emphasis in the pedagogy in planning and design curricula (Whitehand, 2005, 2013)?

It has also been reported that thorough urban morphological investigations are resource intensive and the associated costs can often seem prohibitive (McGlynn and Samuels, 2000); and there are also concerns that detailed morphological research may be unduly time-consuming (Larkham, 2006). This suggests that research of this nature is likely to be impractical for design consultancy unless an abbreviated research process can be deployed with simplified analytical and prescriptive elements (McGlynn and Samuels, 2000). It further suggests a level of responsibility for local authorities and government agencies to raise their own awareness of the relationship between research and policy (Hall, 2000; Samuels, 1990; Whitehand, 2007). Furthermore, as universities have consistently demonstrated the capacity to undertake resource intensive traditional morphological techniques, the outputs of the research should be acquired by local administrations and made available as a resource to assist urban design.

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However, it is in the arena of city development that the deficiencies of the nexus between research and practice are most apparent. Through not engaging with data from broad fields of research (Hamilton and Watkins, 2008), architects and urban designers continue to lack an evidence-based approach to underpin reasoning in their design proposals (Samuels, 1990). Hence a design project advocating urban quality is susceptible to a contrary infrastructure proposal that is supported by qualitative data, and speaks more readily to an audience of policy makers. Typically the argument for urban spatial quality is not well substantiated, and the city suffers as a result.

Design proposals that can emphatically demonstrate how the 'new' builds upon measured and evaluated characteristics of the specific place of development can present a compelling and justifiable case.

Process versus prescription: interpretation versus design control

> Cities are never still; they resist efforts to make sense of them. We need to respect their rhythms and to recognize that the life of city form must be loosely somewhere between total control and total freedom of actions. Between conservation and process, process must have the final word. In the end, urban truth is in the flow (Kostof, 1992, p. 305).

While well-intentioned urban-design guidelines can contribute to coherence and continuity in the development of urban form, a balance needs to be found between the prescriptive desire to control every move of development (Talen and Ellis, 2002) and the latitude required to enable the natural ebb and flow of development cycles that underpin urban growth (Kostof, 1992). This apparent dichotomy is one that requires careful attention: on the one hand, design-based codes can avert problems of incongruity in unfettered development, but on the other a building environment stifled by over-prescriptive design controls may impede innovation and opportunities for new ideas.

Caniggia maintained 'that design must be carried out by a continuous comparison of what already exists with what we are doing, therefore by continuous 'interpretation' if we wish to produce buildings without being vague and individualistic' (Caniggia and Maffei, 2001, p. 27).

Thus within the emergent consensus for the principle of 'morphology before design' (Çalışkan and Marshall, 2011, p. 389) that seeks to place urban morphology at the core of urbanism and urban design (Kropf, 2005), there is a need for increased emphasis on the act of interpretation of urban morphology in advancing consonance in urban form. This emphasis may prove to be more appealing than prescriptive tools, and draw practice closer to research.

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What is *Urban Morphology* made of?

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What are the main approaches, theories, concepts and methods being debated in *Urban Morphology*? Which countries are participating in the debates? Which ones are poorly represented? Which disciplines are prominent? To what extent are authors referring to one another's work? Are the debates attracting the participation of professional practitioners? How widely recognized is urban morphology as a coherent field of knowledge?

In search of the answers to these questions, we analyse 229 contributions to the journal over almost 2 decades – 80 full-length articles, 14 national reviews (the series on the study of urban form in various countries), 11 review articles and 124 'viewpoints'. The findings complement a recent article that reflects on the series of reviews of the study of urban form (Oliveira, 2013).

The analysis is based on four aspects: the contents of the contributions; the geography of their authorship; the disciplinary backgrounds of the authors; and finally, the impact of the contributions. Analysis of the keywords provided in the full-length articles and national reviews reveals that 316 different keywords are used, each keyword being repeated on average only 1.5 times. Does this suggest that the different authors publishing in *Urban Morphology* are not using a common language? Perhaps efforts should be made in future to choose keywords that are shared by wider audiences. The most used keywords are 'urban morphology', 'urban design' and 'urban form', together accounting for over 10 per cent of the keywords used. The use of 'urban design' as a recurrent keyword may be taken as an encouragement to those seeking to explore the borderland between urban morphology and design (Marshall and Çalışkan, 2011). The other most cited words are 'architecture', 'planning', 'history' and 'geography', comprising 7 per cent of the keywords used. Individually these four disciplines have similar weights. Two concepts are among the most used keywords. The first is 'fringe belt'. The significance of this concept to the journal readership is well expressed in a set of papers exploring international comparisons, the national and local dimensions of the concept and particular types of fringe belt within a city (such as the Edwardian fringe belt). The second concept is that of the 'morphological region'. Some variations on the original formulation of the concept are included, such as 'urban landscape region', 'landscape unit' and 'urban structural unit'. Space syntax is another highly cited keyword. Half of the papers using this keyword aim at exploring the