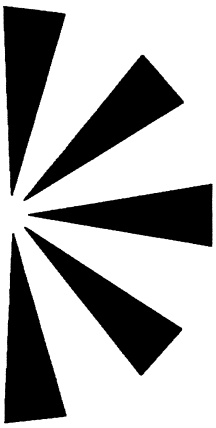

VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Crisis in the typological process and the language of innovation and tradition

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This 'viewpoint' is a reflective exploration of the typological process as developed by Saverio Muratori, Gianfranco Caniggia, Gian Luigi Maffei, Giancarlo Cataldi and others.[1] Out of that exploration comes an argument about the language of tradition and innovation.

The germ of my argument lies in a combination of experiences. The first was helping with the translation of Gianfranco Caniggia's and Gian Luigi Maffei's *Lettura dell'edilizia di base*, published in English as *Interpreting basic building*.[2] The other experience was editing a selection of contemporary architectural writing.

While working on the translation of *Lettura*, a draft was circulated for comments and I was struck by two distinctly different responses to the language (the *parole*) emerging from the translation of Caniggia's and Maffei's text. One was surprise at what appeared to that person to be the obscure nature of some of the language, rendering parts of the text incomprehensible. The other response was one of enthusiasm.

The first person seemed to be saying, 'surely you want to make the writing as clear as you can'. I, for my part, felt I understood the text and was, to the best of my ability, trying to capture both the content and the spirit of it – which is, of course, the duty of the translator. So why was one person openly welcoming the text as it was and the other concerned to iron out the prose?

Language and profession

Here are the facts of the case: one person was female, the other male, one British, the other American, one a geographer, the other an architect. My inclination was to look to the profession as the source of the riddle. This was reinforced by my time spent editing the writings of contemporary architects. A good percentage of architects who commit themselves to print seem to be attracted to fairly abstruse discourse. Ranked by frequency of citation by such architects, the likes of Jacques Derrida and Giles Deluze would probably come quite high.

But, I have to say, as a solution to the riddle of the difference between the ways my colleagues responded, I do not find 'profession' satisfactory. It is too easy and begs too many questions. There must be something behind or underneath the sometimes wilful mutual misunderstanding between people who are fundamentally interested in the same thing.

Crisis and the typological process

At the same time as I was musing on this mystery I was also continuing to muse on the notion of the typological process of Muratori, Caniggia, Maffei, Cataldi and others. In particular I was dwelling on the central concept of 'crisis' – a word that tends,

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for obvious reasons, to induce fear and take some mental energy to tame. Crisis is not, particularly in the context of the typological process, equivalent to catastrophe. It is not external events; rather it is a state of mind induced by events or circumstances. Crisis is a fundamental part of the typological process. Within the process it alternates with identifiable phases of cultural activity to form a series of phases separated by crises.

In broad and necessarily simplified terms, the process according to the Muratorian school is cyclical and within each repeating cycle, there are four phases: of logic, economics, ethics and aesthetics. The crises are transitions between the specific phases.[3]

Pondering on the various expressions of these ideas, there seems to be a disparity between 'phase' and 'crisis' in terms of the conceptions lying behind them. On the one hand, even though the phases have both abstract and concrete dimensions, they seem to refer more directly, and in more detail, to the physical result of the typological process – the diversity of urban form. On the other hand, 'crisis' is dealt with in a more general (if often extensive) way and refers, implicitly, to the mental state of humans involved in the process.

However, not only is crisis a state of mind, it is also diffuse and pervasive within a population; it is demonstrated, for example, by the feelings and thinking that have arisen in response to global warming and resource scarcity. A growing percentage of the population is becoming aware that some of the things we do are not working. There are some habits we have developed that we really need to break if we are to avoid damaging ourselves and the planet. There is a crisis and one of the main responses is the idea of sustainable development.

Habit and crisis

I use the word 'habit' advisedly because it provides the counterpart to 'crisis' by referring more directly to the human state that leads to phases. The periods of stability that we can call phases in the typological process are constituted by cultural habits. I also use the word 'habit' because it provides a way to see the typological process as a specific instance of a more general process and points to more general theories about change. Crisis can then be set within a sequence of habit – crisis – response – habit – crisis – response – habit, conceived of as a spiral chain in time. The spiral is fundamental to the process: there is both repetition and change through time. This model has its roots in the radical theory of habit as put forward by C.S. Peirce. For Peirce, the tendency to form habits or establish repeating patterns of behaviour is fundamental to perception, meaning and language. It is, as he puts it, 'the one law of the growth of mind'.[4]

A necessary complement to habit is chance, which leads to variability. Variation in habit, along with the possibility of breaking habits, is the key to growth and diversity. So, if habit provides a general term for the periods of stability that give rise to identifiable historical phases in the typological process, what are more specific kinds of crisis? And what, if anything, does this have to do with solving the mystery of why my colleagues responded so differently to language?

Kinds of crisis

The connection between the two is state of mind. The central hypothesis of this point of view is that we can distinguish different kinds of crisis on the basis of cognitive factors that contribute to different states of mind. No two crises are the same but there are common factors that lead to a crisis – factors rooted in the capacities or incapacities of our perceptual equipment. A way into the matter is to ask, why do we break habits or change the way we do things? Three basic reasons spring to mind, though clearly they are not the only ones: need, curiosity and boredom.

A crisis of need is rooted in the instinct for survival. We sometimes change the way we do things in order to survive. In the present context, threats to survival include climate change, resource scarcity, and the threat of external attack. Responses include sustainable development, land reclamation, flood or tidal barriers, fortifications and anti-terrorist legislation.

A crisis of curiosity is rooted in the tendency to seek order. We want to find out how things work. In the face of complex stimuli, the eye and brain will tend to draw outlines and identify coherent, nameable objects. When confronted by an ambiguous image, the eyes scan across the image to find an outline. We seek new kinds of order and sometimes change the way we do things to take advantage of that order to get a better result in a more efficient, orderly and predictable way. This kind of crisis is stimulated by the perceived chaos of events and phenomena. The response is the enormous range of human culture: stories, religion, music, visual art, the sciences, technology and, of

course, architecture and urbanism. More specifically, one must include the different theories of architecture and urbanism, including the typological process.

A crisis of boredom is rooted in the phenomenon of desensitization and the compensating tendency to seek stimulus. Our perceptual equipment can only respond to difference. When confronted by a constant, uniform stimulus, our senses adjust or re-calibrate and treat the constant stimulus as a zero point. Repeated exposure to the same image or stimulus has the effect of bleaching the image of meaning. In response, we sometimes change the way we do things in order to sustain our attention: the potentially pathological response is to increase the level of stimulus of the same thing.

The crisis of boredom or, less pejoratively, of desensitization, lies at the heart of play and sport, which fundamentally incorporate the element of chance and therefore unpredictable difference. The crisis of boredom is the converse of the crisis of curiosity. One works to unify, the other to diversify. So, within art and architecture, the response to the crisis of boredom is variation and diversity. Taken as a trend, it tends to be called such things as fashion, mannerism or the constant revolution of the *avant garde*. It is not necessarily superficial and negative. It can point the way to curiosity.

Crisis and language

To an extent, the distinction of different kinds of crisis solves the mystery of why my friends responded so differently to the translated text. The argument goes something like this. The different kinds of crisis are not mutually exclusive but any individual may be more prone to a particular kind of crisis. If you are prone to crises of boredom, one response is to seek ambiguity, uncertainty or complexity which, in turn, triggers a crisis of curiosity. The result, when faced with repeated exposure to the same subject or problem, is a kind of 'alternating' stimulus which sustains your attention. You like the variety but keep hunting for order.

I suggest that the difference in my friends' responses to obscure language lies in one being more prone to boredom and the other more prone to curiosity. As to profession, it was, of course, the architect who liked the translation and, I would guess, more architects would like it than geographers. But the different sorts of crisis are not mutually exclusive even in the individual. Curiosity is prone to desensitization. As noted by the science writer Matt Ridley, 'most scientists are bored by what they have already discovered'.[5]

Crisis, language and process typology

Returning to the typological process, elaborating the different kinds of crisis begins to put crisis and phase or habit on a similar footing and, I suggest, makes the typological process a more powerful tool in seeking to understand how, and why, the built environment changes. It allows us to articulate more carefully the stages in the process from habit to crisis to response and the formation of new habits.

But now we get to the heart of the matter and the real point of my argument about language. We have to remember that the idea of the typological process was itself a response to a crisis – the crisis of architectural language and urbanistic practice in the mid-twentieth century. In very broad terms, the response was to turn to tradition – but critically. To a large extent it was, for the likes of Muratori, a crisis of curiosity, though tinged perhaps with disillusionment. He wanted to get a better understanding of the process in order to get a better result.

But process typology and urban morphology have grown and developed over the past 50 years. More recently they have been strengthened by bringing together the different strands or schools from different countries. The evidence lies in the work brought together through ISUF.

Out of this there arises a question. Can urban morphology and process typology continue to grow if they remain focused on the original crisis? More particularly, can typomorphology continue to be effective as an approach to design if it remains tied to particular traditions? We should remember the 1970s and 1980s. Then, typology and morphology were in fashion. They fed what turned into a crisis of boredom. And, inevitably, people's attention shifted. The fashion came and went.

More fundamentally, it is time finally to come clean and stop trying to dodge the naturalistic fallacy. We must step up to G.E. Moore and David Hume[6] and openly acknowledge that there is no connection of necessity between what is and what ought to be.

If we make a distinction between different modes of language, it should not be between innovation and tradition but between description and prescription. And, at its core, typomorphology is about description. But I would argue that we are,

paradoxically, in a stronger position to use typomorphology to support design proposals if it is independent of a specific design approach and, so to speak, brought to bear from outside the rhetoric of design prescription.

Towards a general nomenclature of urban form

The typological process itself suggests that if typomorphology is not to be discarded as an accessory of a passing fashion it has to establish a language that is not tied to a particular crisis and does not privilege any particular habit of design. It must be agnostic about history and should not in itself attribute value to any particular period in history. It must use the same terms to describe new and old, tradition and innovation.

Certainly we need the languages of prescription and inspiration – the language of persuasion. But we also need a nomenclature that can cut through the self-justifying 'evolve-or-die' rhetoric of pseudo-evolutionary necessity dished out by snake-oil salesmen passing off old forms for totally new. We need terms that can expose those who pander to a false consciousness of history by camouflaging the globalized machinery of modern life with a dusting of tradition.

Then typomorphology can become a tool that cuts two ways. In one direction it can identify with great precision both basic relationships and viable design solutions embodied in the built environment to make much more effective use of that legacy. In the other direction it can inform innovations with a clear idea of the structure of what is introduced and how it fits into wider structures and processes. More importantly, it can provide the means to understand and potentially channel the habits and dynamics of the formation and transformation of the built environment not just for the limited purposes of townscape management or conservation but as a basic background and framework for urbanism.

Urban morphology needs to pull itself out of its niche and demonstrate its wider relevance. To do that, the language of urban morphology and process typology cannot be the language of tradition or innovation; it must be a language common to both. We must show the strength of our common conceptual foundations and build a general nomenclature of urban form.

Notes

1. A version of this viewpoint was delivered as the keynote address at the joint ISUF/INTBAU Symposium, 27 August 2005, in London.
2. Caniggia, G. and Maffei, G.L. (2001) *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* (Alinea, Firenze).
3. As set out in the tables in Muratori, S. (1967) *Civilita e territorio* (Centro Studi di Storia Urbanistica, Roma).
4. Peirce, C.S. (1958) 'The architecture of theories', in Wiener, P. (ed.) *Charles S. Peirce: selected writings* (Dover, New York) 142-59.
5. Matt Ridley as quoted by Dawkins, R. (2005) 'Creationism: God's gift to the ignorant', *The Times*, Weekend Review, 21 May, 6.
6. Hume, D. (2003) *Treatise of human nature* (Dover, New York) Book III, 284-92; Moore, G.E. (1988) *Principia ethica* (Prometheus Books, New York) Ch. 1.

The morpholograph and the spirit of place

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Town planning is about the control of use and form to create 'sustainable' places. One interprets sustainable places as being functional, viable, useful, ideally non-consumptive, and, often overlooked, pleasant to be in. Making great places is why many of us are involved in the built environment field.

Unfortunately, town planning and the processes of modern city building have not been creating memorable, celebrated places for living and work. Modern places may be safe and clean, they may be functional, especially if you have a car, but they lack spirit of place. Indeed, modern planning has been a place-spirit destroyer of monumental proportions. Discordant insertions in the urban fabric of spirited places, mundane or monumental,