

increased energy use. Moreover, it represents a permanent change in built form that cannot be corrected later.

Why, then, are people choosing to live in such houses? Data on social trends within Australia suggest (Shepanski and Diamond, 2007) that the reduction in backyard size has coincided exactly with a trend to substantially longer working hours amongst middle- and higher-income office workers. At the same time, the growth in the use of air-conditioning has not only allowed, but also encouraged, an indoor lifestyle. For people buying a suburban house, the focus has become one of investment in buildings. A particular house form that maximizes floor area at minimum cost has evolved in response. Little priority is now given to planted space around the house, as it is not seen as an investment. The dwelling is therefore extended over as much of the plot as is permitted. These last points remain, for the moment, hypotheses but the questions they raise are ones that cannot be ignored and demand further study and debate.

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'Our common future' in urban morphology

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The presentation of 'Our common future' by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 introduced a new perspective in the debate on cities. Coming out from an essentially environmental discourse, discussions on sustainability pointed to the ways in which development was degrading the environment and compromising heritage for future generations. In just one decade, the sustainability concept was widely incorporated in theory, research and, to a lesser extent, practice on the city. The then new challenge was the conversion of sustainable development into principles or standards of development practice, translating the concept 'on the ground'. A multitude of approaches started to be conceived aiming at developing the sustainability framework. Nevertheless, the implementation of a notion that was so broadly defined proved to be quite difficult.

The analysis of the literature produced throughout the last 2 decades reveals, indeed, a strange paradox. Although this new perspective on cities highlights the key role of territory and urban structure in the process of urban development, and

suggests the development of integrated approaches, it does not seem to include a sound morphological dimension. The reasons behind this paradox are many. On the one hand, disciplines that should be analysing and designing the city, notably urban planning, have been debating other issues. Batty (2010) states that within the world of planning cities are not viewed in terms of their physical or even their social layout or structure, but as ways of negotiating, resolving conflict, engendering development of various kinds through collaboration, and funding development. On the other hand, some critical points have been identified within urban morphology, notably in this journal: the practical difficulties in urban morphology of dealing with the physical scale and complexity of large cities and conurbations; the difficulties of comparing studies of urban form (Whitehand, 2009a) developed in different cultural settings (Conzen, 2009) or involving the use of different approaches (Kropf, 2009); the difficulties of both filling existing gaps in urban morphology and bridging boundaries between different fields of

knowledge (Whitehand, 2010); and finally, the difficulties of moving from morphological explanation and description to planning prescription (Whitehand, 2009b).

Against this background, it is argued that three fundamental issues should be placed on the agenda of urban morphology for the next decade. One major challenge for urban morphology is to be able to identify its most important and morphologically-specific contributions to contemporary cities and societies. In fact, it is urgent to strengthen the morphological dimension of the debate and practice on cities. In this sense, urban morphology should pay less attention to criticizing, modifying and transforming the wealth of its already sophisticated concepts, methods and techniques, and pay more attention to potentiate the conditions for the application of its contributions. This process will necessarily involve some simplification, but it does not have to mean a loss in the fundamental contents of the discipline. Two examples of such simplification are given, the former of a technical nature, the latter with a methodological dimension. Angular segment analysis is a method recently introduced in the space syntax community (see, for example, Hillier, 2009). It focuses on road-centre lines, a particular type of information that, unlike the axial lines that are central to the former space syntax mainstream method, axial analysis, is easily available in many countries for use with GIS. This step forward makes space syntax less consuming of resources and potentially more attractive, both to academics outside urban morphology, and to practitioners. The second example, more familiar to readers of this journal, is the framework proposed and applied by Kropf in the 1990s (see, for example, Kropf, 1996). Based on the work of Conzen and Caniggia – particularly the concepts of ‘plan unit’ and *tessuto urbano* – Kropf proposes a framework for identifying and describing, in hierarchical terms, the main elements of urban form. After a process of simplification of the existing theoretical and methodological background, in order to make it more operational, Kropf was able to bridge the gap between the geographical and architectural studies of urban form and the zoning system of planning.

The second issue for the agenda should be development of key cross-disciplinary links between urban morphology and the different bodies of knowledge studying the city, promoting effective integrated research. Despite the advantages of transferring morphological knowledge to these different disciplines, the fact is that its occurrence is quite limited. In urban morphology – and more

generally in the social sciences and humanities – the ability to identify and build cross-disciplinary links, and the awareness of relevant work in other disciplines, are not very common (Whitehand, 2010). The fundamental, and realistic, challenge is to find a balance between two distinct poles: integration and specialization. The process of identification and construction of the specific links should involve the participation of academics, practitioners and citizens. Bearing in mind the goal of sustainability, disciplines such as urban ecology, urban sociology and spatial economics deserve our attention. The development of each particular linkage presupposes the capacity of researchers to gather and synthesize broad perspectives, knowledge and skills. Because most researchers, even in urban morphology, are trained in traditional disciplines, they must learn to appreciate differing perspectives and methodologies. A major breakthrough over the next few years would be the provision of a sound morphological dimension to other fields. This could, for many research projects, provide the desired added value and, ultimately, enable further advances in shared knowledge about cities.

Finally, the third issue for the agenda should be the development of key linkages between this integrated research and planning activity. Although it should be that urban morphology is one of the disciplines feeding planning, in practice urban morphology and planning exist in largely separate worlds. The mutual isolation is broken by occasional events, such as guest lectures, government planning officials joining the steering committees of research projects, and academic researchers becoming involved in development projects (Whitehand, 2007). In addition, it seems evident that the different models and approaches provided by planning theory in recent decades, despite their usefulness in relation to other professional issues, have not helped in coping with the morphological dimension of cities. The establishment of linkages between explanation and prescription should involve reflection on what is planning practice today: what is the ‘demand’ for morphological support, and what can urban morphology, in fact, offer to planning practice and development control – what is the ‘supply’. Urban morphologists should engage in real planning practice instead of attempting to simulate it; learning to understand the interactions between the proposed tools – developed together with planning practitioners – and the different contexts.

The current debate and practice on the city does not have a sound morphological dimension. ‘Our

common future' in urban morphology must involve a careful reflection on what should be our contribution, how it could be part of wider integrated research on cities, and how this could be applied in day-to-day planning practice.

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UK/Ireland Planning Research Conference 2011

The annual Planning Research Conference for 2011 will be held in Birmingham, co-organized by the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University, between 12 and 14 September.

Its theme is 'planning resilient communities in challenging times'. These challenges include climate change and associated environmental issues; financial constraints, access to credit and economic uncertainty; political and security disorders; the effects of social polarization and migration on communities; and challenges to existing patterns of governance and leadership. Many of these topics have important implications for urban form. For urban morphologists, a seminar and visit to the M. R. G. Conzen Collection at the University of Birmingham are planned (numbers will be limited).

Planned thematic sessions include

- planning for climatic change
- planning theory
- sustainable development
- mobility and transport
- planning for risk
- urban and rural regeneration
- participation and governance
- urban design and physical forms
- planning and the economic recession
- learning and education

Keynote speakers include Lord Richard Rogers (chair of the UK Government's Urban Task Force); Simin Davoudi (Newcastle University); Kelvin MacDonald (Policy adviser, Royal Town Planning Institute) and Kieran Rose (Dublin City Council).

Further details of the conference can be found at www.curs.bham.ac.uk/planning-research-conference-2011

Meeting of the Council of ISUF

The next meeting of the Council of ISUF will take place during the Conference of ISUF to be held in Montréal, Canada, 26-29 August 2011. Any matters that members of ISUF wish to bring to the attention of the Secretary-General of ISUF, Dr Kai

Gu, should be communicated to him at the School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: k.gu@auckland.ac.nz) by 1 August 2011.