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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

local and national levels. Complaints tend to focus on increasing traffic congestion, overstretched local services and the visual degradation of towns and countryside by 'inappropriate' development. The complaints tend to be levelled at both the planners and the developers. If there is any acceptance of the need for development on the part of the public, it is often only grudgingly so, on the basis that it should provide benefits for the local community in the form of services such as hospitals, leisure centres and community facilities. In fact, the government is currently seeking to address these issues with legislation to give more planning powers to local communities.

The design professions sit at the nexus of these three main interested bodies: the local authority planners, the developers and the public. Paid either by local authorities or landowners/developers, the designers' job is to try to satisfy all three. In caricature, this means providing 'sustainability' for the planners (who are driven by policies demanding it), profitability for the landowners and developers (often tied to very rigid business and physical models for housing development) and appropriate development and community benefits for the public (who often expect more than can be delivered by the scale of development).

For the designer, the process involves the seemingly impossible task of translating all three of these positions into specific designs.

Registers of language

Because the three different groups have different sets of interests, they focus on different aspects of what is plainly a multifaceted 'subject', the built environment. Each speaks in a different 'register' (*parole* or *language game*) about the same thing.

What is the most appropriate way to convince planners that your proposed development is sustainable? Generally, it is to set it in terms of the policies and objectives they themselves have identified from the wider conception of 'sustainable development'.

How do you persuade house builders to build differently when they have, in their view, a successful and tested, profitable business model? Again, the most persuasive arguments are likely to focus on the terms and ideas the house builders use themselves: maximizing gross-to-net ratios of developable land, speed through the planning system, standard types, cost engineering, 'kerb

appeal', sales performance and profit.

Standing in front of a local community, what do you say to engage with the residents and work out the best options for growth? What arguments do you need to use to persuade communities to accept development when, in general, they do not seem to want it? What are their concerns? To persuade people, as the saying goes, you need to speak their language. You need to talk about community, neighbourhoods, services, aspiration, security, safety, status (and traffic). They want to know where the heart of the neighbourhood will be, what the schools will be like, where they can meet people, get the things they need and do the things they want to do. This characterization leaves out, of course, the academic register and the professional register (for example architects, urban designers or housing professionals).

While the house builders and developers are relatively adept, out of necessity, at talking the language of both planners and the public (with varying degrees of sincerity), the other three groups are not always so versatile. In general, the planners are comfortable in the public register but are suspicious of and not fully versed in the developer's register; the public are suspicious of the jargon used by both the planners and the developers and the academics tend to keep to themselves.

Moving into or out of the academic register can be problematic. On an anecdotal basis, one of the common problems faced by editors when considering articles for publication that cross from built environment practice to 'research' is the translation of terms and language from one register to the other.

Within the sphere of urban morphology, the difficulty – which is true of even the most well-known contributors – is that there is often a disjunction between the academic discourse and the design discourse. The connection is not made clear enough. Driven by the imperatives of their professional practice, there is a seemingly inescapable desire on the part of designers to invent new terms and concepts. There is also a need, when seeking to convince clients and planners, to 'tell the story' and sell the idea, setting it out in terms that engage that audience. That language of design and persuasion does not immediately fit into the more finely tuned academic register. An academic pursuit needs a relatively consistent set of concepts and terms while the design professions thrive on diversity, invention and analogy.

Translations

But if analogy can be an enemy of ‘academic’ coherence because it is too loose and variable, it also has the potential to act as a bridge between different groups. There is a distinct advantage in combining ‘loose’ analogical thinking and ‘strict’ systematic thinking. Combining different kinds of description provides a richer and more accessible body of knowledge. The analogy provides a familiar starting point for people unfamiliar with the specialist language. Most fields of study make use of both technical and common names. This suggests that anyone interested in the application of urban morphology in practice needs to engage in *translation* from one register to the other. Difficulties do arise, however, when the term one seeks to translate has no corresponding common name or the likely candidates already have an established meaning that obscures the new concept. Examples include the terms ‘plot series’ and ‘plan unit’ used by M. R. G. Conzen or *fascia di pertinenza* and *tessuto urbano* used by Gianfranco Caniggia. In the case of Conzen’s terms the individual words are common enough but the precise meaning will not be obvious to the ‘lay reader’.

A similar issue arises when talking about urban morphology as a whole. The name of the discipline is itself unfamiliar to many people. And the lack of familiarity is not helped by the fact that there are many different names that people use (typology, morphology, typo-morphology, process typology, morphogenesis). There is also a tendency for people in the field (the typologists and morphologists) to highlight the fact that it is a complex, multifaceted combination of ideas that can only be fully understood together. If we want people, in particular practitioners and the people who make decisions about urban development, to take up the ideas, we need to break the field down into digestible parts and not force people to swallow it whole.

One way to do that without losing the coherence of the ideas is to identify distinct branches of the study. It is then easier to summarize the field as a whole without feeling the need to complicate the summary with all the different aspects it covers. Rather, the summary can focus on what gives the field its coherence: the study of the structure, growth and diversity of human settlements. The list of sub-fields or branches then itself serves to summarize the range of aspects and highlight what the field has to offer.

Structure and diversity

The primary task of urban morphology is to identify and describe the common elements and generic structure of urban form. A parallel primary task is distinguishing the diversity of specific forms that develop in different locations and cultures. What are the pieces of urban form and how do they fit together? What is the range of ‘real objects’ that make up a town and help to explain the development and regeneration of settlements? What are the specific forms that give places their physical identity? These questions are a matter of urban systematics, typology and taxonomy. In most cases, the identification of form is not sufficient in itself but is a means to further investigation, explanation, interpretation and application in practice. Recent papers within this sub-field include Davis (2009), Kropf (2009), Noizet (2009), Osmond (2010) and Whitehand (2009).

Growth and development

Probably the most active and familiar sub-field in urban morphology is concerned with describing and explaining the common developmental regularities or repeating processes in the growth and transformation of individual settlements (or individual elements). The aim is to identify processes that are likely to recur and so provide some vaguely predictive insights into what is more or less likely to occur (and succeed) – this is the subject of developmental urban morphology, urban morphogenetics and urban ontogeny. Examples of work in this area include Conzen (2009), Griffiths, Jones, Vaughan and Haklay (2010), Kirfan (2011) and Lin, De Meulder and Wang (2011),

Evolution

A core sub-field that builds on both systematics and developmental urban morphology is concerned with describing and explaining the *diversification* of urban forms over time *as a coherent process* in relation to human purposes and specific locations and situations. How have the different specific types – the diversity – of forms we find in different places come about? What is the root of different building traditions? Why do some types persist or spread? These questions appropriately fall under the headings of evolutionary urban morphology and

urban phylogeny: see, for example, Barke (2011), Davis (2009), Noizet (2009) and Rego and Meneguetti (2010).

Performance

Another active branch seeks to describe and explain the performance characteristics of urban forms or their characteristics in use. A range of different methods is used within this sub-field, including spatial and configurational analysis, patch analysis, network analysis, statistical analysis, capacity assessment and valuation. Labels that may be applied to this range are quantitative urban morphology, urban mechanics and dynamics, environmental performance and configurational dynamics. Examples published recently in this journal include Kirfan (2011) and Osmond (2010).

Culture and meaning

Perhaps one of the broadest sub-fields of urban morphology involves investigating the cultural meaning of urban form and how people respond to it, exploring what specific forms reveal about the people who created them and their effect on us now. This sub-field embraces socio-cultural urban morphology, ethno-morphology, heritage significance, and the semiotics and phenomenology of urban form: for examples see Cooper (2005), Gauthier (2005), Groth (2004) and Reeve, Goodey and Shipley (2007).

With clear justification this last 'sub-field' of urban morphology might be better termed a form of human geography, which is to say that urban morphology itself can be, and is, seen as a sub-field of other, broader fields of study such as cultural anthropology, archaeology and environmental psychology.

One way of looking at these relationships is to suggest that the common conceptual core of urban morphology that focuses on identifying the structure, diversity and genesis of urban form can serve as a tool within other fields and disciplines. In this respect urban morphology is a 'service discipline'. The central core is not enough on its own. It needs an application.

Providing a focus

That need for an application should be a significant motivation to meet head on the challenge of

translating the different registers of language used by different groups involved in the development process. Urban morphology should be a service discipline to not only other academic fields but also professional planners, developers and the interested public.

In this regard one form of translation whose power should not be underestimated is illustration. People are often much better able to get an intuitive grasp of an idea from an image than from pages of text.

There is, I believe, a core concept in urban morphology that is particularly amenable to illustration that could provide a clear central focus and pivotal link between different groups. That concept is urban tissue. It is both a concept and identifiable object, making it much easier for a wider range of people to grasp. As both concept and object, urban tissue is in many ways emblematic of urban morphology. It is the principal constituent or unit of urban growth and transformation. It embodies the idea of different scales, referring up to patterns of settlement and referring down to the commonly identified elements of streets, plots and buildings. As an idea it also embodies the key morphological concepts of type, social process and performance.

More can and should be made of urban tissue as a tool within urban morphology and as the gateway between the discipline and the outside world – notably the domains of planners, designers, developers and the public. It can and should contribute more directly to the decision-making process of urban growth and development. In many ways the power and strength of urban morphology is dissipated because it lacks the kind of central focus that urban tissue could provide. The common points are there but they are not evident to most people. We need to make them more evident.

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Glossaries and dictionaries of urban morphology

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It is 25 years since Pierre Merlin and Françoise Choay (1986) undertook their report on urban morphology in France, Italy, Great Britain and the United States on behalf of the French Ministère de l'Équipement et du Logement. Contributed to by a number of international experts, the report was later published as the *Dictionnaire de l'urbanisme et de l'aménagement* (Merlin and Choay, 1988), making it available to a larger French-speaking readership. In celebrating the anniversary of Merlin and Choay's work, it is timely also to reflect on dictionaries, glossaries and similar works covering the field of urban morphology that have subsequently been produced.

Over the past 25 years the major growth of urban areas and the great changes in their character have had significant implications for the way in which urban morphologists analyse and reflect about cities. There has also been recognition of the advantages conferred by the multidisciplinary of urban morphology as a field of study at a time of growing compartmentalization of knowledge. But at the same time a number of problems of the field have become evident. Basic sources of information have become dated and, partly as a consequence of being a field of knowledge approached by several

disciplines, in many different cultures, languages and countries, the lack of widely accepted terminology has become an impediment. Information needs to be updated and made accessible to the variety of scholars, researchers and practitioners interested in urban morphology. In particular this is needed by young researchers, but also by people in mid-career who are on the periphery of urban morphology or moving into it from other fields. Much of what is currently available on the Internet lacks quality control and much of what is in print is out-of-date or covers only a fraction of the field.

Newcomers to the field searching for ready-made solutions might, from the title and recent date of publication, be attracted by *Urban Morphology* (Surhone *et al.*, 2010), but this turns out to be a miscellany of Wikipedia articles, lacking editorial input or justification for their selection: as an urban morphology collection it lacks substance, rigour and logic. It could scarcely be more remote from fulfilling the need for an up-to-date coherent index of terminology that would help to provide the basis for organizing conceptual frameworks and connecting individual studies to those frameworks for which Whitehand (2006) has argued.