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The master plan is dead: long live urban morphology

Brenda Case Scheer, College of Architecture and Planning, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112, USA. E-mail: scheer@arch.utah.edu

The master plan is dead. Or so declared participants in ISUF's recent conference in Delft. Perhaps it is premature to declare it so, but it is clear that large-scale master plans have fallen out of favour in places where resources have become ever tighter and uncertainty rules. Maybe it will be barely-surviving theme parks like City Center project in Las Vegas ($8.5 billion) that will eventually signal the death knell of gigantic, destructive, and finance-intensive urban projects. Big transformative plans never really made much sense anyway, requiring devotion to a single vision carried out at great expense in a short time (Gregor, 2012). Only in China, where large cities can rise from scratch because of the existence of resources, absolute control and desperate demand, is the big master development plan relevant any more, and even there it may be a bad idea.

And if it is the end of master planning – brought on by limited resources, dispersed and democratic control, the need for sustainability, and the emergence of a post-know-it-all world – then what takes its place in practice is utterly dependent on urban morphology.

New projects are small: one might call them anti-master – an almost personal and quirky urbanism. Small urbanism operates where existing cities, places, cultures and landscapes are deliberately engaged – where the solutions to specific problems arise or emerge from the physical conditions and socio-economic systems. Small urbanism is not so much *designed* as it is *discovered* through systematic analysis of history, networks and patterns. It implies a continuous urban pattern rather than a disruptive one, or it is disruptive deliberately to supply an emergent pattern. It enhances a framework, or it organizes a framework. It looks to the past and to the future – predicting and accommodating the next evolution as well as the present one.

Specifically, effective urban design strategies of the future and immediate past are eschewing a large disruptive master plan in favour of using the existing patterns of places to provide clues about the next development. Urban designers and architects are increasingly looking to a number of strategies: we might call them the five Rs (repair, reuse, reveal, regionalize and rupture).

1. *Repair*: to repair or restore a pattern or fabric that has been disrupted or lost, especially a network of streets or open space corridors. A notable example of repair strategy is the restoration of gateways or symbolic places whose orientation has been inappropriately shifted or obscured by subsequent development. An illustration of this is the redevelopment of land previously occupied by large shopping centre islands to restore street patterns and create connections to nearby neighbourhoods (Williamson and Dunham-Jones, 2009).
2. *Reuse*: to reuse appropriate types or patterns that can still have useful lives in modern, especially resource-challenged, times; to adapt patterns for contemporary use in such a way as to preserve the general scale and grain, but acknowledge modern sensibilities, materials, modes of transportation, and so on. Such strategies can include infill or new development that is continuous or contiguous with older patterns. Europeans seem to do this best: see for example, the Borneo-Sporenburg houses in Amsterdam, which are a reinterpretation of the canal house type (West 8 Urban Design and Landscape, 1993-1996).
3. *Reveal*: a more complex strategy that discovers or uncovers previously uncelebrated or even unknown patterns and historical artifacts in the existing place, and then uses that discovery to create new, usually public, spaces or development programmes, which themselves organize development. A famous example of this is the Highline in New York City (www.highline.org).
4. *Regionalize*: using historical patterns borrowed from one part of a region to legitimize new development and new typologies in another place in the region. This strategy is used to tie old and new together, to brand new development with the aura of nearby older places, and to invoke climatic and environmental appropriateness. In Savannah, for example, a waterfront redevelopment deliberately invokes the older, much beloved pattern of old Savannah in its new town plan (Conn, 2010).
5. *Rupture*: to deliberately break a pattern that is unhealthy, ill-adapted to changing climatic conditions, and unfriendly to quality of life. Increasingly, this strategy will be used to adapt suburban fabrics that have evolved in energy-profligate times. So-called 'road diets' that narrow large arterials are an example (Rosales, 2006).

In all of these, the understanding of urban morphology and the evolution of building typologies are keys to the strategy. By measuring and analysing the urban fabric over time, the designer gains a realization of the subtleties, and especially the particularities, of a place that otherwise can be easily overlooked and misinterpreted. A common misinterpretation is the 'contextual' building design, which simply mimics the details of nearby buildings (or worse, generalized 'historic' buildings) without reference to the actual scale of the fabric, the relationship of the building to the street, the massing of buildings, and their evolution and adaptation from one type to another over time. I would venture that the lack of subtlety in interpretation of context leads to very banal, and sometimes even laughable, fake historical design.

Whenever these historical changes are misunderstood, the designer misses an important analytical key that would ground the new project in the community and provide honest historical continuity. Perhaps the best way that urban morphologists can help to encourage these developments is to help codify and name the analytical techniques and meta-patterns. For example, concepts like the Conzenian 'fringe belt' or my own distinction in suburban tissues (campus, static and elastic) (Scheer, 2010) provide ready-made analytical ideas that can be passed to

designers as a way of recognizing existing form more precisely. Morphologists need to work a little harder to define and recognize different generalized tissue types and to name these terms consistently. Naming formations helps diagnose conditions (diseased tissues do exist), as well as establish how unique conditions can be discovered.

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The contemporary city: speaking the same language in design and theory

Noha Nasser, University of Greenwich, Old Naval College, Park Row, Greenwich, SE10 9LS, UK. E-mail: N.Nasser@Greenwich.ac.uk

Urban morphology and urban design point in different directions: one looking back at existing reality and the other looking forward to a future reality (Marshall and Çalışkan, 2011, p. 416). This has led several authors to describe urban morphology and design as part of a continuum in which the *understanding* of the city can eventually lead to a better *design* of the city (Marshall and Çalışkan, 2011; Moudon, 1992; Whitehand, 2005): looking backwards and learning from the successes and failures of the past can assist designers in shaping future built environments. This historical approach to design remains popular in urban design discourse. But the separation between past and present, understanding and design, has been a challenge in the development of a meaningful shared language between theory and practice.

The significant body of knowledge produced by the British tradition of urban morphology and the French and Italian traditions of typomorphology have been strongly grounded in urban historical development. In these traditions, however, the focus on European historical cities 'may seem to hinder practical application in today's wider world' (Moudon, 1997, p. 9). In the work of the Italian school, 'the application of the concept of building type in urban design practice has been systematically affected by the overwhelming importance placed on the culture of historic centres' (Marzot, 2005, p. 30). Morphogenetic analysis of the historical core, and the reification of the traditional building type, became design tools used to guide architectural and urban practice. It is not surprising that this backward glance became so prevalent during the period of reaction against the failures of modernism in the 1960s. It seemed to many that the only means of establishing a more integrated solution to modern city form was to reconnect the study of urban form to the development of a theory of city design by looking to historical city-building traditions as the *modus operandi* for city making.

This reaction to modernism also explains the rise of historical approaches in urban design practice outside Italy. There were two developments in particular. The first was a strong movement to conserve and manage established settlements before they were demolished by the indiscriminate force of modernism. The second was a pattern-book approach to reproducing the spatial relationships of the European pre-industrial town in the neo-traditional style of New Urbanism (Krier, 1979). In both cases, urban design practice was motivated by a sense of loss and what MacCormac (1994, p. 70) describes as a 'deep sense of incongruity and a feeling that the nature of change is such that instead of affirming what exists and adding to it, the modern environment is perceived to have destroyed what was good and not to have improved on it'. Driven by a need to protect and manage urban quality, as well as renew the dignity and value of architecture, much of urban design practice became more about design control rather than conceptual