

the city at this moment of 'making', provides the intellectual space where theory and practice can find a shared platform. This recognition is already influencing the urban morphology research agenda, as witnessed in the ISUF 2011 conference on 'Urban morphology and the post-carbon city'. For designers there is a need to understand the tools at their disposal to shape cities according to the spirit of society. In parallel, urban morphologists can help understand and critically evaluate contemporary rapid change. In this way it will no longer be necessary to speak only in terms of a continuum, of past or future. Instead an arena can be constructed in which urban morphology and urban design support each other to offer solutions to the challenges of the contemporary city.

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Morphology and design: the developing dialogue

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The development of new understanding in emerging fields of study is followed naturally by the urge to apply or test this in practice. In the field of urban morphology, however, we find that in the relevant disciplines of practice, such as urban design, morphological understanding is often already applied, without its application being fully understood. With a broader awareness of meaning, such application could be so much richer in its outcome.

It is timely to link good practice in urban design to an understanding of the principles of urban morphology. The growing awareness of morphology and the sensitive study of urban form occur

at a time when attitudes to urban development are already being re-focussed.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the process of urban renewal was about large-scale clearance of urban fabric, expunging buildings, plots and memories to provide a tabula rasa for extensive redevelopments. We have moved some distance from regarding this as the ideal form of urban renewal.

The tendency now for renewal to focus on the surgical infill of existing urban sites has helped to create among designers an awareness of the morphological dimension by which such sites relate to each other and to the city, albeit that they may

not employ the term 'urban morphology'.

In 1991 an urban design competition for the renewal of Temple Bar, Dublin (Temple Bar Properties, 1991) broke new ground by giving pride of place to a solution in which modest new buildings were inserted individually among older ones within an established plot pattern with minimal need for site assembly. This acknowledged the importance of established plot scale as distinct from the need for a conspicuous display of intervention.

In the fundamental relationship between the plot and the structure of the city, a framework that accommodates the scale of this relationship flexibly has always served the city well, accommodating elements of both continuity and innovation. The delicacy of this relationship should not be underestimated: if it works, the city works.

In Sligo, in the west of Ireland, in 1992, the preparation of an award winning urban-renewal plan for a problem street block at Rockwood Parade, took into account the existing working structure of land use on each individual plot within the block (Sligo Corporation, 1992). From this came an understanding of how the social and economic forces of plot-specific organization collectively formed the broader fabric of the block, with the ability to recognize for each plot the relationship between modern organization and inherited form and space.

The resulting plan identified, plot by plot, both problem plots and plot combinations which, within a carefully structured strategy, were then subsequently hand-managed in a programme of rejuvenation for the block. The success of the scheme prompted the local authority to recognize the role of what was essentially morphology, though not initially referred to as such. From this recognition, however, the planners developed an approach which has since involved increasing reference to urban morphology in their plans (Sligo Borough Council, 2004), and their most recent statutory development plan establishes, as a development principle, the intention to retain plot structure as heritage in an area occupied by older blocks (Sligo Borough Council, 2009). This has yet to be tested against individual development intentions, but what is most interesting is the field of practicability explored in such a venture. Once the planners engage with urban morphology at this level the process can then be tuned by experience, review and even conflict, until a workable means of implementation is recognized.

An understanding of urban morphology has much to contribute to the practice of urban design,

but the contribution can be two-way. Understanding gained from the experience of practice can also contribute to the advancement of morphological theory.

Design is a research process, in which options are explored and interrogated in a sequence of trial and error. Often in this process, solutions that are not immediately applicable are set aside and lost. With a morphological overlay however, the relative meaning of solutions in urban design, both rejected and accepted, can be more fully understood. In the process, layout theory can be advanced, producing in time a broader inventory of options or fields of exploration for the urban designer.

As it proceeds the practice of design accumulates evidence, but if focussed on a local brief it often falls short of turning that evidence into an understanding of the complex relationships under which broader urban form is born. In an ideal world, the morphologist reads the evidence and presents its meaning back into practice. As soon as practice recognizes this value, the meaning is explored, and the creative process of interaction develops.

What is responsible for the greatest loss of potential is the inadequacy of the dialogue between the practice of design and morphological research, particularly where the designer may be exploring new organizational typologies. A recent study by Çalışkan and Marshall (2011) of the respective literatures of urban morphology and urban design shows subject overlaps of only 7 to 10 per cent. Evidently there is some distance to go.

The emerging study of urban morphology by students of architecture is a welcome development in the right direction. Perhaps a greater awareness of each other by the design professions and urban morphologists will secure a more substantive transfer of ideas.

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