# The potential influence of urban morphology on planning practice

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If we were to ask the question does the academic study of urban morphology have an impact on planning practice, then the answer would have to be that this is still not much in evidence and that there is a long way to go. However, if we were to ask to what extent the physical form of urban areas is now the subject of planning policy, then the answer would be a far more optimistic one. The growth in the importance of physical form in planning policy practice creates an important opening for the application of urban morphology, and a consideration of how it might be applied is, therefore, timely. A distinction must be made at the outset between, on the one hand, the content and limitations of planning legislation and procedures in any given period and, on the other, the thinking and intentions of both writers and practitioners at the same time. They do not necessarily coincide. The latter will be considered first.

In its essentials, planning has not been, and can never be, value free. The intervention in human affairs that it represents is justified by the goals it pursues in the public interest. In respect of the physical form of settlements, it is arguable that planning activities have been concerned with physical goals throughout history. What has varied, particularly in recent times, is how their relationship to social, economic and environmental issues has been perceived. The period in which concern with socio-economic issues took greater preference over physical planning, to the extent that the latter became unfashionable, was probably the 1970s. Since then, we have not just seen a more substantial emphasis on urban design, and pursuit of a sense of place, but a re-thinking of how these can be achieved. In addition, from the 1990s onwards, the pursuit of sustainability has placed physical planning not just at the centre of debate but has caused it to become properly integrated with environmental issues. The conservation of energy and water requires attention to the design of urban areas both at a detailed level and, just as importantly, to the overall shape and structure of cities.

What then can a study of urban morphology from a more rigorous academic perspective contribute to this? Clearly, an understanding of the historical evolution of the form of towns and cities can inform the development of planning policy in many useful ways. However, beyond this rather obvious point, there is one vital insight where the 'penny has yet to drop'. The profound implications for planning of the observations made by M. R. G. Conzen in his study of Ludlow (Conzen, 1988) have never been fully and properly understood. He pointed out that what he termed 'systematic form complexes' had markedly different degrees of persistence. The 'town plan' showed 'maximal persistence', lasting over many centuries, the persistence of the 'building fabric' was 'considerable' but the persistence of 'urban land utilisation' was 'minimal'. In other words, the *activities* on land are far more short-lived and, therefore, change more frequently than do buildings and infrastructure. A decision to allow the construction of a building is, in effect, a long-term one. The alignment of a road may persist for many centuries, if not millennia, even though it may be widened out of all recognition. Although development plans may be produced for 'plan periods' of, say, 10-20 years and reviewed every 5 years, the proposals within them, if implemented, may be around for at least 50-60 years and, more likely, many centuries to come. This is not to say that planning policy should not address the use of land and buildings, however short the time period. There may be excellent and pressing reasons for doing so. The problem occurs when plans and policies say very little about physical form and where it is left entirely for developers to make their own proposals. It is not uncommon for plans to leave the physical form to look after itself with only the land uses being specified. An associated issue is that arrangements for the onward growth of a town or city beyond the plan period are not normally considered – every extension is planned as though it is the last. Urban morphology leads to the insight that it is the long-term growth of the physical form of settlements that should be the primary concern of a development plan. Other considerations can then follow.

Aside from this major observation, what has urban morphology to say on the more detailed and procedural aspects of planning practice? An

immediate problem in considering this is the number of different planning systems around the world. Those in Australasia and North America are different in fundamental ways from the discretionary system in Britain, and other European countries are different again. They can also change over time, as has been shown by the total rethink represented by the fundamental change in New Zealand in 1991, and the subsequent influence of its principles on planning law in parts of Australia. However, urban morphology can still aid the formulation of the content of policy instruments by providing the basis for a more holistic view of urban form, as opposed to specification of a limited number of parameters. In recent years, changes have been afoot in many countries around the world that would permit this. Where 'codes' are used there have been moves to ones that are explicitly 'design codes' or 'form-based codes'. In the more open, discretionary style of the British system, design guides and site specific briefs, which have a long history, have, over the past 2 decades, become increasingly clear on the desired patterns of physical form. Under all systems, master plans for major new developments are now increasingly common.

This leads to one final and very significant contribution that urban morphology can potentially make to the planning process. Having a picture of the desired urban form is one thing: getting to it is another. One of the reasons why 'codes' have not been 'design' or 'form' based in the past is that their authors have had difficulty relating the choice of parameters of form to the achievement of the end product. Planning processes present particular challenges as they operate incrementally over long time periods and will inevitably involve negotiations between many stakeholders. What urban morphology can provide is a language that conveys the essential components of the desired form. If the appropriate language is used in both the planning instruments and negotiations then successful outcomes will be much more likely.

**Reference**

Conzen, M. R. G. (1988) 'Morphogenesis, morphological regions and secular human agency in the historic townscape as exemplified by Ludlow', in Denecke D. and Shaw G. (eds) *Urban historical geography: recent progress in Britain and Germany* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) 253-72.

# Bridging the research-practice gap: the case of China

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In *Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis*, Conzen (1960) pointed out that 'the congested townscape behind the front rows of plot dominants, though of great interest to the historical geographer, cannot claim the same intrinsic value as a physical environment for present-day living and working and is bound to disappear in time'.

These words remind us that academic research does not necessarily provide direct answers to the practical problems posed by urban development. Though a good deal of attention has been given to promoting the integration of the theory and practice of urban morphology, bridging the gap between research and practice remains an important issue (Whitehand, 2007).

To organize the variety of activities concerned with urban areas, each country has developed its own technical and political process concerned with land-use control and design of the urban environment. These processes vary greatly not only in their intrinsic character but in the ways in which and the extent to which research on urban form is incorporated.

In China the urban planning system includes three aspects: the legal system, the administrative system and the operating system. The legal system (including laws, codes and specifications) is the foundation of the administrative and operating systems, a major characteristic being its mandatory nature. Prominent in the administrative and operating systems are the roles of planning practitioners. In these practitioner roles the distinction between research and practice is far less clear than in a number of Western countries, notably the UK. As in so many fields of knowledge in China, academics undertaking urban