Substance, method, and meaning in urban morphology

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My immediate purpose in offering a specific definition of urban morphology at the Delft ISUF conference[1] was to attempt to place discussion of the problems of comparative study in the field on a reasonably sound footing, or at least one that itself could be open to scrutiny (Conzen, 2013). There was an underlying curiosity, of course, to see if anyone would take issue with it as a definition per se, and perhaps even offer radical alternatives. The Viewpoint by Karl Kropf and Sylvain Malfroy (2013, pp. 128-31) is therefore welcome for expressing some reservations about parts of it and raising matters fundamental to the way the field is viewed and practised.

All knowledge is ultimately indivisible. We specialize (and compartmentalize) its acquisition simply for the gains in understanding that systematic and technical analysis of parts of it can yield, holding all other parts not directly connected to them constant. This is the basis of scientific 'disciplines'. Yet analysis must lead to synthesis to have value, and synthesis eventually requires transgressing disciplines. Their boundaries are fluid (if not sometimes chimerical), and their locus lies in the eye of the beholder, or, in the interest of collective understanding, in agreement among beholders. And agreed-upon boundaries too are notoriously fluid. In this context, Kropf and Malfroy argue for a minimalist, if not an outright 'puritan', view of urban morphology.

The conceptual definition of the field – discipline, if you will – offered at Delft aims at implicit inclusiveness and explicit succinctness. Clearly, that is asking for trouble. Kropf and Malfroy find lurking ambiguity in the definition. In part, the disagreement seems to be over a definition *sensu lato* (mine) versus one *sensu stricto* (theirs). Yet possible ambiguity in the former is not an automatic quality, nor necessarily a disqualification of it. Most succinct statements run the risk of having thorny ambiguities laid bare.

It is hard to argue with Kropf and Malfroy's assertion that urban morphology should approach the built environment as 'an enormous set of indices of the human activity that created it', and that it should highlight 'those aspects of urban form that escape the awareness of the agents that influence such form'. But to advocate excluding the cultural meaning of such indices, intentional or otherwise, from the thoughtful practice of the field is nothing short of remarkable. Certainly semiology is particularly well equipped to probe symbolism, but surely in pursuing 'the relationship between built forms and the symbolic purposes of builders' there is fertile ground on which the two, for example, and even some other fields, can meet, overlap, and assimilate relevant insights?

The key complaint about including symbolic meaning in the definition of urban morphology seems to be that it appears to mix explicative and exegetical methods. Without question, such a methodological distinction is important to make, but which sciences embody only one to the rigid exclusion of the other? Would Kropf and Malfroy have urban morphologists limit their work simply to measuring – in the language of statistics – the 'dependent' variable, while leaving the identification and interpretation of the 'independent' variables to other disciplines? Is urban morphology to be reduced to mere pattern-recognition as a self-imposed end in itself? They justify this on grounds of a 'division of labour', but should not the field aspire to as holistic an interpretive synthesis as the immediate topic at hand requires? Not for a minute does the Delft definition imply that all studies in urban morphology must, for example, *necessarily* include semiotic or quasi-semiotic analysis; simply, that a rounded approach to explaining, and, yes, understanding the morphogenesis of the built environment might well on occasion profit from doing so. Thus, in practical terms a divorce between measurement and meaning seems untenable, and limits interest and applicability. Citing the role of morphology in linguistics as a parallel for the entire scope of urban morphology itself seems of questionable value. Language forms exist almost entirely within a social system, except for their physical expression in loose, engraved, stamped and digital materials, and are materially far less dependent on environmental circumstances than are the multitude of built structures in cities and their spatially-rooted arrangement within them. The analogy is no more helpful than the flawed idea that cities can be equated with 'organisms', since the latter reflect no endogenic choices made in their behaviours, however produced, whereas cities represent an almost infinite and cumulative plethora of such choices on the part of their

participant creators.

In proceeding to consider whether an 'abstract analytical approach' such as Kropf and Malfroy seem to propose can indeed incorporate meaning, they appear to undercut their earlier argument. The ideas of Rykwert (1988), Muratori (Cataldi, 1991), and Caniggia and Maffei (2001) provide sterling examples of measurement freighted with meanings, meanings that centrally shape the direction and structure of investigation, and serve as stimuli to confirm, disprove, or reformulate them. It is hardly necessary, then, to detour to the English countryside in search of pigs and politicians, although contests there over the meaning and significance of residential 'flats' for morphological change on the urban fringe do seem grist for our mill.

By invoking Bejing's Forbidden City, Granada's Alhambra, and the whole city of Washington, DC, as too big to be explained in their totality by urban morphology, Kropf and Malfroy introduce a needless dichotomy. The Delft definition of the field makes no such claims to omnipotence. The field exists because no other discipline or specialized sub-field places the elucidation of urban built environments as physical facts in all their temporal and geographical complexity at the centre of its conceptual and empirical agenda. It is in no sense whatsoever an 'auxiliary' field, handmaiden to big disciplines such as history, geography, architecture, planning or public policy. Urban morphology is an organized body of knowledge (although we can certainly argue about how organized it is at present), with an attractive set of proven analytical methods, that offers crucial insights about the relationship of urban societies to the transformed physical-cultural habitats they have created and occupy in the long process of their variegated evolution. It also highlights implications this restless relationship may hold for the future balance of people and resources, the utopian goals of so-called 'best practice' in design and regulation, and the general well-being of 'urbankind'. This seems agenda aplenty.

So much so, that Kropf and Malfroy's almost incidental closing thoughts about identifying sub-fields within urban morphology do help bring back into circulation an issue needing development. This has only occasionally been the subject of sustained thought, perhaps because it smacks of potentially over-zealous bureaucratic fussing about classification. Yet seeing this study or that in urban morphology as concerned with one major cluster of interconnected 'big ideas' or another, or one substantial methodological approach or another, does lend coherence to the field as a whole and the intellectual 'place' or contribution of any given study within it. Such a structure of sub-fields can occasionally be glimpsed in the wider-ranging surveys of urban morphology that exist (see, for example, Allain, 2004), and the national surveys of substantive research in urban morphology that have run periodically in *Urban Morphology*. Mostly, however, these have been concerned either with grouping the detailed morphological phenomena examined into suitable groups for review, or with the rise of disciplinary and national schools of thought with, occasionally, ideological overtones. More recently, thinking on this issue has been pitched to a more basic level, seeking fundamental conceptual commonalities among different approaches as an organizing principle, to which Kropf himself has made a signal contribution (Conzen, 2010; Kropf, 2009).

Yet there are gaps and tensions inherent in any attempt to categorize – some would say pigeon-hole – specialisms. Most obviously, there is the issue of time-scale: is urban morphology to be the morphogenetic study of the built environment, as Kropf and Malfroy advocate? Where does this leave researchers intensely focused on the current functioning (or shall we say 'performance') of present-day urban form? What role for practitioners in the fields of urban design and planning regulation, not to mention proponents of public advocacy? Whatever the answers, the value of identifying a number of recognizable sub-fields or specialties in urban morphology can only help give the field greater clarity and coherence.

But at the core of all these considerations lies the question of essential definition. Any respectable field should be definable in a single well-constructed sentence. To my knowledge there exists no substantial, easily accessible compilation of competing and conflicting definitions of the discipline of urban morphology – far less a critical assessment of their relative strengths and weaknesses. It might be salutary to draw up such a list, from the published literature and from new efforts at formulation, and to examine their content and internal consistency. If the Delft definition is challenged by further thoughtful analysis, and, if failing to survive scrutiny, is replaced by a more compelling one, then it will have served its purpose.

Note

1. For those reading this commentary as a discrete document, the Delft definition referred to by Kropf

and Malfroy is repeated here: 'urban morphology is the study of the built form of cities, and it seeks to explain the layout and spatial composition of urban structures and open spaces, their material character and symbolic meaning, in light of the forces that have created, expanded, diversified, and transformed them' (Conzen, 2013).

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Some thoughts on the first output of the ISUF Task Force on Research and Practice in Urban Morphology

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In 2011, ISUF launched a task force under the chairmanship of Ivor Samuels to investigate ways of creating better linkages between researchers in urban morphology and practitioners. A key recommendation of this task force was that a 'good practice catalogue' of where and why urban morphology was being used successfully should be compiled (Samuels, 2013). The first investigation – undertaken by Mafalda Silva, supervised by Vítor Oliveira – is an assessment of the application of morphological principles adopted in the 2006 Plan for Porto. A significant feature of this Plan is its adoption of a typological approach to urban zoning based on the identification of ten types of urban tissue (Oliveira, 2006). The presentation of this assessment at the recent ISUF Conference in Brisbane stimulated the following thoughts in relation to its wider relevance.

The apparent acceptance of the importance of morphological principles by the Portuguese planning authorities is greatly to be welcomed and the potential and benefits of wider application are clear, but inevitable questions arise over the likely obstacles arising in adopting such an approach elsewhere. My first thought as a UK-based academic is how difficult it would be for this typological approach to be practiced in a UK city of similar size to Porto. Notwithstanding some isolated examples (Hall, 2008; Hall and Doe, 2000), and recent changes in the planning system with the objective of introducing more flexibility, it is arguable that the structure and culture of the UK planning system relegates such issues to the periphery of planning matters. For example, the official Planning Advisory Service website of the Department of Communities and Local Government contains a series of 'good practice' case studies but, within these, issues relating to urban morphology are conspicuous by their absence. Despite quite genuine efforts to bring about change, the silo mentality of architects, urban designers, planners and, indeed, academics remains a powerful constraint.

A fascinating issue raised by the Porto case and the Portuguese planning system generally is the practice of dividing responsibility for plan preparation and plan implementation. The body drawing up the development plan is not subse-