

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-

quently responsible for putting it into practice. Whilst one reaction to this system is that it appears to be a potentially disastrous division of responsibilities, there is no logical reason why this should not work. Indeed, it could be argued that there is advantage in an 'outside' body taking a fresh look at a locality in the interests of preparing an original and less constrained plan. It could well be, for example, that such arrangements could facilitate the incorporation of urban morphological considerations and their elevation to a higher priority, whereas an 'internal' perspective may be more concerned with functional and routine issues. However, an important conclusion of the Porto study was that the incorporation of urban morphological approaches appears to be easier in historical areas than new ones. But, again, there is no logical reason why this should be the case. Whilst many aspects of urban morphology relate directly to heritage, distinctiveness and place identity, and therefore engage strongly with communities and their livelihoods and well-being, the same principles apply to all localities. Urban morphological principles have as fundamental a role to play in place making in new areas as in historical ones.

The Porto assessment also raised an old but still largely unresolved issue concerning façadism. In a number of cases in the historical core, façades had been retained but the interiors demolished with no respect for traditional housing types. This illustrates the complexity of a full adoption of urban morphological principles into the planning and development process. Should urban morphologists be content with the recognition of the importance of conserving the traditional frontage alone and hence a part of the townscape of a particular locality or should they reject such a compromise on the grounds that the entirety of a building is inseparable from its history and its setting? Yet, if the latter, possibly extreme, stance

is taken could this not be argued to be a reactionary preservationist stance resistant to a 'natural' process of typological transformation?

One final consideration that again illustrates the extreme complexity of inserting urban morphology in its entirety into the planning process is that the 'morphological' input into the Porto plan appears to have been interpreted mainly in relation to buildings. Urban tissue is interpreted largely as typological zones in so far as these relate to buildings. But in addition to architectural, typological and building/plot relationships there are other aspects of urban morphology that have significant claims to be relevant to the planning process (Gu, 2010; Whitehand and Morton, 2004). A fully comprehensive approach to incorporating urban morphological principles and concepts into planning requires a sensitive appraisal of the entirety of the urban tissue.

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## Annual Meeting of the Urban Affairs Association

This conference will take place in San Antonio, Texas, USA, 19 to 22 March 2014. It will include sessions on cities and urban regions in the Americas. Among the topics on which papers are invited are:

- Changing urban morphology
- Historic city centres

- Urban historical geography
- City planning in the Americas

Participants must register and pay fees by 1 February 2014. Further information is available from Joel Outtes (e-mail: [Outtes@uol.com.br](mailto:Outtes@uol.com.br)) and Betty Smith (e-mail: [besmith@eiu.edu](mailto:besmith@eiu.edu)).

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