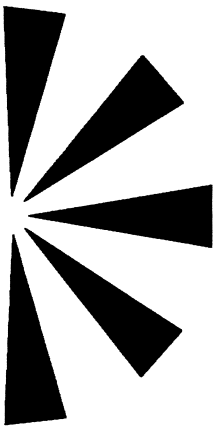

VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Urban design as urban morphology

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In perusing the provocative Viewpoints in recent issues of *Urban Morphology*, three views in particular stood out for me: the call for an abbreviated research process that can be deployed with simplified analytical and prescriptive elements (Sanders, 2013, pp. 116-7; see also McGlynn and Samuels, 2000); the argument for urban repair rather than totalizing master plans (Scheer, 2013, pp. 48-50); and the case for more linkages between sustainability and the study of urban form (Marat-Mendes, 2013, pp. 123-4). I believe these views encapsulate what happens when urban planners teach and practice urban design in a way that is not so much about balance, texture and composition – so important in the design of a building or specific site – but more about design that gives emphasis to *where* and *why* a building or site needs to be designed, a landscape enhanced, a street calmed, or a garden planted (Talen, 2009).

Two concrete examples amplify what I mean by this. They show how urban morphology informs urban design in ways that hit all three targets: analytically straightforward, incremental in approach, and directed by sustainability principles. The connection to sustainability requires explanation. Urban planning approaches to urban design are often directly related to sustainability: first, they emphasize diversity (the mix of people, uses and functions); secondly, they assume that cities should be scaled to the walking human body rather than to the fast-moving private vehicle; and thirdly, they are intended for places that already exist, thus prioritizing infill over greenfield development. This is obviously not the *only* definition of sustainability, nor does it claim to include all dimensions. But these are the dimensions of urban design that urban planners regularly emphasize, and for which an urban morphology perspective is invaluable.

My first example is connectivity, which is an essential theme in urban design. Cities and neighbourhoods that maximize mix and increase the connections between people and things are thought to be more vibrant and healthy. Strategies for increasing connectivity are based on the view that the built environment has the effect of constraining or promoting passive contact. These connections vary in scale and involve different types of routes and spaces – public and private, residential and non-residential, storefront and sidewalk. A focus on street connections draws attention to the size and shape of blocks, which have a significant impact on the corresponding patterns of movement.

An urban morphology-inspired analysis might involve the following: finding the regional systems (roads, greenways, transit lines) that intersect the neighbourhood, and identifying the points at which the neighbourhood connects to these regional systems; looking closely at streets, blocks, parcels and land use to identify areas that may have connection problems, such as culs-de-sac, housing areas built after 1960, or multifamily housing arranged in superblocks; looking at places that

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function as neighbourhood centres and identifying routes and pathways immediately around them that seem to have poor connectivity; and examining clusters of activity spaces or other places that should have a high degree of interconnection.

A second example involves the urban design idea that sometimes it is important for neighbourhoods to have centres – places that provide a common, centrally-located destination that not only provides needed services for people, but also functions as tangible evidence of the common bond that people living in the same area share. Such places may, over time, promote a sense of shared responsibility.

Again, an urban morphology-inspired analysis might involve characterizing the different kinds of centres already known to exist (schools, libraries, road intersections), and understanding how their character, functionality and design requirements vary along dimensions of use, physical condition, public access, and the character of surrounding thoroughfares. Is there good building frontage for a sense of enclosure around the space, or are there weaknesses that need to be mitigated? Is there one side on which to focus, and others to leave as they are? Should some frontages be lined or wrapped with more permeable, pedestrian-friendly frontage? Is there a good mix of uses at the centre (especially public as distinct from commercial)? Are there uses that should be added, such as facilities or commercial spaces, or even parking? Could existing uses like parking lots be given dual purpose? Are there well-designed entrances and gateways to the centre? How do people from all points around the centre get to it? Are the surrounding street crossings appropriate? What design elements might be added on the site to improve its function as a plaza, square, green, or other civic space?

These are but two examples of how urban morphology is central to urban design that advances sustainability and is incremental and pragmatic in spirit. I believe that planners who use the intellectual and pragmatic tools of urban morphology will be the ones who help ensure that, in the design of human settlements, fundamentals do not get lost – like how to make a neighbourhood function well, how to support social diversity through design, and how to make a place more civic-minded. With an urban morphology orientation, they can be the ones ensuring that the creative process of urban design does not obfuscate fundamental considerations in favour of fashion.

References

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Consolidating urban morphology as a discipline

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When I gave a lecture to the Urban Design Group (UDG) in London on the subject of urban morphology, I started by stating my unapologetic determination to use the term urban morphology. I felt that statement was necessary – confirmed by the audience's response – because of the number of people who either stare blankly when I say what I do or who suggest it might be better to find another term. The latter group includes urban design professionals who value the contribution urban morphology makes to urban design practice.

Comments over the years in the Viewpoints in this journal reinforce the perception that urban morphology is not well understood or actively used in planning and urban design practice. Indeed the ISUF Task Force on Research and Practice was set