



VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Urban morphology as a framework programme for research

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Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development are funding instruments created by the European Commission to support and strengthen research in the European Research Area. The latest framework programme, FP8, also named 'Horizon 2020', aims to interrelate international experience and knowledge, with special emphasis on making scientific knowledge applicable in practice. Researchers and practitioners, including architects and urban planners, are invited to submit relevant projects in the company of partner institutions.

There are several headings under which urban morphologists might fit, for example: Energy, Environment and Climate Action; ICT Research and Innovation; Social Sciences and Humanities; Society and Transport (<http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/>). However, there is no direct connection with architecture, urban planning and urban form. Furthermore, in the particular calls for applications, there are none that deal directly with cities and the quality of life in them in a comprehensive and systematic way. The physical structure of the city is not recognized as a spatial framework that corresponds to the complex demands and needs of contemporary life and is a visible result of all the processes that take place within this framework. Within the scope of the topic 'Smart urban future', one would expect results that have spatial implications. But can we expect 'smart' results if just one spatial aspect is considered – for example, climate, energy, transport – without considering them in relation to other

aspects of the built environment?

The problem of a partial approach in facing complex urban phenomena has been recognized in contributions to this journal. The need to take a comprehensive approach in which a sound morphological dimension is crucial, has been pointed out (Oliveira, 2011; Oliveira and Silva, 2013). However, judging by the proposed topics of Horizon 2020 the desired breakthrough can hardly be expected. We are still in the position of choosing between different approaches instead of dealing with the issue of how to combine and coordinate them (Kropf, 2009). Discussions at the latest ISUF conference in Porto on linking research and practice (Morley, 2014, p. 152) re-emphasized the need to promote recognition of the cultural and environmental significance of urban form and the importance of its contribution to social and economic well-being as specified in ISUF's new Porto Charter.

Perhaps it is an opportunity for urban morphology to prove its wider relevance and be proposed as a *real* 'framework' for framework scientific programmes of the European Commission that have goals related to improving aspects of the built environment. Few other fields of social science have both developed such an active discussion of the need to integrate theory and practice and prompted such a vigorous debate on the benefits of interdisciplinary and international cross-connections (Samuels, 2008; Whitehand, 2013), while realizing the challenges to which such aspirations lead (Whitehand, 2012). The approach

to investigating urban form as a key concept and complex urban phenomenon enables consideration of a wide range of topics, including 'grand challenges' (the term used in Horizon 2020), of which healthy environments, climatic change and energy consumption are but a few examples. Professionals engaged with the urban environment, and supposed to solve the problems of today's and tomorrow's cities, have various 'profiles' but those most relevant to the visible results of these activities are those of architects and urban planners. If we assume that they have different starting points, which is usually the case, with the same aims of producing new forms of urban and physical structures, one wonders how long they would wander about until they reach the point where urban morphology has already been?

Reading about 'our common scientific future' in Horizon 2020 (<http://bulletin.sciencebusiness.net/news/76212/Any-questions-A-guide-to-Horizon-2020>), it is hard to resist posing the question of why architects and urban planners cannot deal directly with urban form in all its complexity instead of

putting themselves into the roles of luminaries on climate change, energy consumption, sustainable development and the like just for the sake of surviving in the latest era of 'scientific' funding.

References

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The recent economic downturn and fringe-belt creation in Reykjavík, Iceland

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The recent global financial turmoil has left its mark on cities practically worldwide (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2009). The sharp slowdown in economic activity has moved in tandem with a housebuilding slump (Nicholas and Scherbina, 2013). Whitehand (1972a; 1972b) argued that economic slowdowns were major factors generating housebuilding slumps and in turn created conditions conducive of fringe-belt formation. This fits the evidence from a number of cities for much earlier periods (see, for example, Barke, 1974, 1976; Conzen, 1960; Louis, 1936; Whitehand, 1972a, 1972b, 1974, 1977). In Iceland the formation of fringe belts has principally been influenced by physical hindrances to growth, a topic also addressed in studies of fringe belts in other countries. However, at least until now, economic conditions have not played as important a part in fringe-belt formation in Reykjavík as they have elsewhere. The question arises as to whether the recent economic downturn and housebuilding slump will prove to be sufficiently severe and

prolonged to generate a new fringe belt at the current urban fringe of Reykjavík.

Housebuilding slumps and fringe-belt formation

Fringe belts originate at the temporarily stationary or very slowly advancing fringe of a town and are composed of a characteristic mixture of land uses initially seeking peripheral location (Conzen, 1969, p. 125). During a prolonged halt in the outward advance of the built-up area a varied assortment of land uses normally seeking large, cheap peripheral sites have tended to occupy land immediately beyond the urban fringe, forming a fringe belt. This belt, which tends to include considerable amounts of land occupied by institutions, has become embedded in the urban area during a subsequent resurgence of residential growth (Whitehand, 1988, p. 51).

Whitehand (1972a, pp. 52-3; 1972b) applied the