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Further thoughts on research and practice in urban morphology: a British perspective

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An ambiguous attitude prevails in the UK with respect to academics. On the one hand, they are often sought out as experts on particular matters. On the other hand, in the planning and urban development field in particular, they are also considered as managerially incompetent and politically potentially dangerous (Healey, 2008, p. 873).

This observation draws attention to one of several dilemmas facing the closer integration of academic study in the field of urban development (including urban morphology) in the UK. In relation to urban design, Marshall and Çalışkan (2011) argue that there are three 'applications' of urban morphology:

- As an investigative or exploratory technique to find out 'what happened' within an area and where change in form is studied to better understand urban change more generally;

- As a diagnostic or evaluative tool – a way of studying 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' kinds of urban fabric;
- As a means of identifying examples, types or elements of urban form that could be used as units of design.

Leaving aside the issue of in whose terms 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' may be defined, some of these applications – especially the last – resonate with the ISUF Task Force (Samuels, 2013) conviction that a lack of morphological understanding can lead to poor design. But urban design and the management of change in existing built environments are rather different things. In conceptual terms (if not always in practice, see McCormack, 2013), the relationship between urban morphology and urban design is a close and potentially creative one (Ding, 2013; Scheer, 2013). The relationship between urban morphology and

conservation and planning *practice*, in the sense of a continuous ‘day-to-day’ management activity, is not so immediate and it is the latter that is the concern of this Viewpoint.

The complexity of urban morphology itself is an issue. Kropf (2009) has demonstrated the range of different phenomena that can be objects of urban morphological enquiry. Whilst this range is inherent to understanding built forms, it may be problematic in the application of morphological principles in practice. The many components of urban morphology are related to each other in a hierarchical manner (Kropf, 2014). A wide range of phenomena, including architectural style, building materials, streets, street blocks, plots, and land use, are involved, and different types of analysis, including town-plan analysis and typological form analysis, may be used. Different component forms such as fringe belts, plot series and character areas may be recognized. The range of issues to which any detailed consideration of these aspects gives rise is liable to be problematic in practical ‘day-to-day’ applications.

In relation to a particular problem in practice, an important question concerns the point at which communication between researcher and practitioner should begin. Ideally it would be from the beginning. But in the vast majority of cases this is impracticable. For example, of the 8000 plus conservation areas within England (English Heritage, 2014), a high proportion have existed for a number of years. In other words, in most cases urban morphologists would be joining an activity that has been in progress for some time. This presents a challenge for any intervention – the ‘secular’ processes within any area will be well under way, as will the policies and practices of the planners/conservation officers attempting to respond to them. And the relationship between these two is likely to vary in numerous ways in different conservation areas. In such circumstances, what is the appropriate role for the urban morphologist to play? Should it be as a ‘critical friend’ commenting and advising on management practice, or as a consultant, attempting to create an overall management strategy based on morphological principles? Alternatively, the urban morphologist may play the role of ‘expert witness’, responding to specific issues and providing specialist advice on particular aspects or cases. Yet another rather different role could be that of partner, where any management strategy is devised in collaboration with the relevant planners.

Most of these issues might be seen as ‘practical’ or procedural problems. But the interest in

exploring the links between research and practice in urban morphology stems from a concern that academics and practitioners have been moving further apart in a broader sense. Although stereotypical, the problem may be summarized as academics reproaching practitioners for short-term, conceptually shallow ‘solutions’ to immediate problems whilst practitioners criticize academics for over theorizing and failing to engage with the ‘real world’. Although reducing what is essentially a continuum to somewhat artificial categories, three key elements for any research enterprise may be recognized – practical relevance, methodological rigour and conceptual sophistication (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). Practitioners are likely to have greatest interest in the first of these, whilst researchers are more likely to focus on the third. Both will be interested in methodological rigour but, as they are starting from different poles, ‘rigour’ is likely to be perceived differently. Practitioners need to be convinced that the ‘rigour’ of the researcher has some meaning and application beyond the printed page. Thus, for the urban morphologist to have significant impact upon practice, communication is a key issue. Many practitioners would argue that academics talk ‘in code’ to each other (Cohen, 2007) and this functions as an exclusionary mechanism for others. The usefulness of research to practitioners is a function of the extent to which they can interpret results and apply them. If the language in which these results are expressed is inaccessible, this is unlikely to take place.

Table 1 attempts to isolate some of the issues relating to the requirements of someone doing a ‘practical job’ on the one hand and the very different, essentially intellectual role of the academic on the other.

Whilst the practitioner is usually legally bound to operate within an established legal framework which creates the parameters for the role performed, especially if a government employee, the academic can operate within a very different agenda; one that is much more personal in character or, possibly defined in terms of the role played by a larger research group or research peers. The practitioner’s role is frequently one of attempting to reconcile the perspectives of a variety of interested parties in any development or policy whilst the role and training of the academic is to recognize the established orthodoxy, but then, frequently, to challenge it. In carrying out their role, practitioners inevitably have to operate within an established consensus, whereas the ‘job’ of the social science academic is, arguably, to challenge existing paradigms.

Table 1. Contrasting professional contexts of government practitioners and academic urban morphologists

Practitioners →	← Mutual Interest →	← Academic urban morphologists
Urban form/townscape		
Operate within legislative frameworks		Operate within personal/research group and peers' agenda
Reconcile perspectives of developers, protagonists and public		Recognize established knowledge: but challenge it
Operate within established consensual paradigm		Probe the horizons of knowledge: seek new paradigms
Answerable to a local political bureaucracy		Answerable to self/own intellectual integrity
Tangible outputs – implementation of a plan/strategy		'Ideas' main output – academic publications
Impact agenda?		

The cultural background of the two groups also varies in other ways. Whilst the government practitioner is directly a public servant, answerable to local communities but also to a local and national political bureaucracy, the academic retains a considerable degree of freedom of thought and action, despite significant recent attempts to curtail this. The role of the practitioner may frequently be to seek a consensus whilst that of the academic is to challenge established perspectives. Finally, whilst the practitioner is essentially concerned with tangible outputs – with the preparation or implementation of a specific plan or strategy – the main 'output' of the academic is frequently considerably less tangible, being concerned with ideas in the abstract (although they may of course subsequently have practical application).

In the UK recent changes within the economic and political environment are likely to significantly affect the nature of the academic/practitioner relationship. Universities have increasingly to look beyond government sources for financial support and those providing such resources are likely to demand outputs that meet their agendas and needs (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). Furthermore, recent changes in the academic assessment of research quality within the UK are relevant, as a significant criterion for judging this 'quality' is the 'impact' of research on wider society.

Whilst the longer term influence of this new criterion for 'measuring' research 'quality' remains to be seen, universities are increasingly likely to place emphasis on impact-based research in their own research strategies. One outcome of such pressures may well be a greater degree of convergence in the dichotomies between practitioners and academics identified in Table 1, as academics rethink their roles in relation to new strategic and financial pressures.

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An urban morphological bible? A view from China

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With the rapid spread of interest in urban morphology, the monograph on Alnwick has become the most important medium by which scholars have come to know the morphogenetic ideas of M. R. G. Conzen. It has recently been translated into Chinese and Italian. In this monograph, the concept of the urban landscape or townscape was enunciated as a tripartite division: town plan, building fabric and land utilization (Conzen, 1960, p. 3). *Alnwick* has had a major influence on a subsequent generation of researchers (Whitehand, 2001).

Curiously, however, in light of Conzen's great contribution to the study of urban form, the study of Alnwick was concerned only with the town plan. His envisaged eventual treatment of other aspects of the urban form of Alnwick never materialized. Yet this detailed research on the town plan (Conzen, 1960, 1969) has for newcomers to the Conzenian approach, especially for researchers outside Britain, become almost a guide book. It has been cited far more than any of Conzen's other publications (Table 1).

However, the majority of interest in Conzen's work has arisen since the 1980s, much of it since his death in 2000. A major factor accounting for this long-delayed influence was undoubtedly the relatively small amount of research undertaken on urban morphology in the decades of the 1960s,

1970s and 1980s. Now, in contrast, urban morphology is undergoing unprecedented popularity, including in China (Lu, 2014). But new key works of comparable influence to *Alnwick* have as yet not been forthcoming. This would not have been such a significant problem if Conzen's widely scattered publications on aspects of urban morphology other than plan analysis had become better known. Unfortunately, his integrative work on 'Urban morphology: its nature and development' was never completed. An outline of it, prepared between 1992 and 1999, is all that reached publication (Conzen, 2004, pp. 269-83).

With the major expansion of ISUF in recent years, *Alnwick* has for some become a kind of urban morphological bible. Enthusiasm for Conzen's approach has been forthcoming from researchers in various countries: fringe belts, plot cycles and plan units are among the phenomena that have been explored, often in environments remote from Alnwick. But this needs to be complemented by greater knowledge of his other publications as a basis for building securely on the foundations that he has provided. Unpublished documents in the University of Birmingham's Conzen Collection have potential to give a more complete picture of Conzen's conception of urban morphology. Completing the task left unfinished by his demise is a major challenge.