
Research and practice: a Finnish retrospective

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The relationship between research and practice has recently attracted a good deal of attention from urban morphologists, particularly from those in America and Western Europe. However, conditions vary so much geographically that perhaps a perspective, or more accurately a retrospective, from Europe's northern fringe is appropriate.

In an ideal world, planning is preceded by research focusing on a subject useful for the next planning challenge. Research and planning should reciprocate. But the world is seldom ideal. And the Finnish 'world' and my own place in it have fallen well short of ideal over a lengthy period.

My own experience is indicative. Starting with my graduate thesis, my research focused on historical grid plans, whereas my practical work was mainly within master planning – and mostly in a city lacking a historical grid plan.

During my time in the university in the 1960s architects did not work within research and they were not supposed to. Only a few architects in Finland were interested in research, and there was little or no history of such interest.

The background of both urban morphology and landscape morphology in Finland is unusual in a number of respects. In the early-twentieth century the first master plans were made by Eliel Saarinen. The most important was that for Helsinki. It was based on thorough research, which, strictly speaking, was not academic research. Saarinen appointed a young architect Otto-I. Meurman on the condition that he would specialize in urban planning and design. Meurman agreed, and after Saarinen had emigrated to the USA continued to work in the tradition that Saarinen had established. In the 1920s and the 1930s Meurman was a practising planner, simultaneously developing his ideas for an ideal urban environment. In 1937 he was appointed as a professor of urban planning and design – the first such position in any Scandinavian country. After the Second World War the results of Meurman's research and thinking were published as a book for students of architecture and urban planning entitled *Asemakaavaoppi* (*How to plan cities*) (Meurman, 1947). The application in practice was Tapiola Garden City, which was started soon after the book was published.

In landscape morphology, J. G. Granö's book *Reine geografi* (*Pure geography*) (Granö, 1929)

(Finnish edition 1930) was a notable contribution. He later made a classification of the different landscape regions in Finland. This classification subsequently found its way into school geography. Thus schoolchildren, including myself, were taught the differences between *maisemamaakunnat* (the nearest term in English being 'landscape regions') even though they did not know about the research on which they were based. The method of delimiting landscape regions was similar in principle, though different in scale and in its results, to that employed by Conzen (1975) within urban areas, but awareness of Conzen's work remains very limited among Finnish architects.

Very rapid urbanization in Finland made master plans necessary for growing cities. They were a new type of plan in the 1950s and 1960s. Most master plans included – besides the actual plan drawing – a 'study book' containing various types of maps and drawings explaining, for inhabitants and decision makers, what was planned for the future of the city. Looking back now, 50-60 years later, it is obvious that the maps and drawings can be classified as 'urban morphology', though at that time the term 'urban structure' was used rather than 'urban morphology'.

Urban growth led decision makers to start considering the old grid plans occupied by low wooden houses. In many cities the street network remained as it had been, but instead of 1-storey wooden houses new multi-storey so-called 'stone houses' (actually made of brick and later of concrete) were built.

In 1960 Olli Kivinen (a disciple of Meurman) completed his PhD thesis on the process of development in old grid cities (Kivinen, 1960). Among other things, he demonstrated that it was not necessary to construct 6-storey houses in small, slow-growing towns. This research was a starting point for the renewal of building ordinances in numerous towns in the 1960s.

Kivinen became an extremely active planner, but his personal research developed little beyond his PhD thesis. However, in later years as a professor of urban planning, first in a department of architecture and later in a centre for urban and regional studies, he started several multidisciplinary urban studies, spoke warmly about research, and encouraged his students to develop research interests. The fields of urban planning and urban

development had heretofore remained largely unexplored, and the research topics pursued ranged widely, though they might be broadly referred to as 'morphology'.

The available resources in Finland are limited, and were limited even before the present economic conditions. Architecture and urban planning are taught in three universities and arguably five or fewer professors have been interested in research. The rest concentrate on teaching planning and design. Consequently the development of knowledge is slow. At Tampere University of Technology during the time of Terttu Pakarinen a morphological tradition was starting to form – several younger researchers focused on space syntax. It was a great loss when Pakarinen died suddenly at a point when she had finally freed herself from administrative duties and could dedicate her time fully to research.

As a master planning practitioner, I was not able to use the actual results of my research, but research was useful in another way. Working with research I learned to write various kinds of reports, which in my time at university was not a skill taught to students of architecture. And master planning entails a great deal of writing.

Conversely, planning practice gave me a viewpoint different from that of historians and art historians in studying building and planning legislation and interpreting historical plan drawings.

References

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ISUF 2015: City as organism: new visions for urban life

The Twenty-Second International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF 2015), hosted by the Faculty of Architecture of Sapienza, University of Rome, will take place in Rome, Italy, from 22 to 26 September 2015. The theme of the conference is 'City as organism: new visions for urban life'. Topics to be covered include:

- New and historical landscapes
- Infrastructural networks
- Modern constructions and Mediterranean identity
- Urban growth and fringe belts
- Contemporary design for historical cities
- Urban aesthetics and new developments in urban design
- Eco-cities
- Urban morphology and urban regeneration
- Reading and designing urban fabric

- Urban form and meaning
- Urban knots
- Architectural heritage preservation methods

Post-conference excursions will take place in Rome (E42-EUR), Hadrian's Villa (Tivoli) and to the historical town of Todi.

The Conference Scientific Committee comprises: Giancarlo Cataldi (University of Florence, Italy), Michael Conzen (University of Chicago, USA), Kai Gu (University of Auckland, New Zealand), Ivor Samuels (University of Birmingham, UK), Jean-Francois Lejeune (University of Miami, USA), Vítor Oliveira (University of Porto, Portugal), Piero Ostilio Rossi ('Sapienza' University of Rome, Italy), Jeremy Whitehand (University of Birmingham, UK).

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