
Muratori or Rossi? A Chinese perspective

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Debates in this journal, not least between the Urban Morphology Research Group in Birmingham University, UK and followers of Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia in Italy, have helped to draw the attention of Chinese urban morphologists to the Muratorian school. However, the work of this school remains less known in China than that of the Conzenian school. This is owing in substantial part to the fact that much of the work of the Muratorian school is still not available in English – and even less of it is available in Chinese. An attempt is being made, therefore, to translate into Chinese the important book by Caniggia and Gian Luigi Maffei (1979) on *Composizione architettonica e tipologia edilizia 1: lettura dell'edilizia di base*. It is hoped that this will help to clarify aspects of Italian typomorphology that have remained a source of confusion among Chinese researchers and hindered the application of Muratorian and Caniggian thinking in China.

Muratori and Caniggia are latecomers in China compared with their fellow Italian Aldo Rossi. An important part of the explanation for this is that Rossi's *L'architettura della città* (1966) was translated into English (Rossi, 1982) well before work began on the translation into English of much of the work of Muratori and Caniggia. It was, furthermore, couched in terms that appealed to a wider readership and had an influence on Chinese academics through the publication from the 1990s onward of a number of introductory articles. Rossi's critique of 'naïve functionalism' and descriptions of the longevity of urban forms so impressed many architects and students that they were moved to turn from post-modern symbolism to Italian typology and neo-rationalism. They adopted such terms as 'type', 'collective memory' and 'analogous city', though with little appreciation of Rossi himself or his school of thought. Rossi did not leave any of his designs in China and *The architecture of the city*, though making reference to the work of many geographers, is weak on the geographical basis of urban morphology (Whitehand, 2003). It would be hard to argue that Rossi helped his Chinese fans to bridge the gap between architecture and morphological studies.

'Building typology', which was close to being equated with 'urban morphology' by Italian

architects such as Muratori and Caniggia, seems to most Chinese architects to be a term for use when responding to cultural or historical critiques of the creations they have been responsible for in the course of growing urban sprawl in China. From their standpoint, building scale seems to be absorbed into city scale, reminding us of Alberti's reciprocal metaphor quoted by Peter Eisenman in his introduction to the first American edition of Rossi's book: 'the city is like a large house, and the house in turn is like a small city' (Rossi, 1982, p. 9). Plots, streets and street blocks are not considered – even plots that are intimately related to building types. So the city is an abstract city, without Muratori's scale, Caniggia's level of specificity or Karl Kropf's concern for levels of resolution. Architects maintain sensitivity at high resolution to the pattern and change of elements such as materials and roofs, but at lower levels of resolution they are unresponsive to the pattern and change of elements such as streets, plots and street blocks. The historicity of the city has been widely ignored. Architects prefer to describe historical continuity and context artistically, according to subjective feelings rather than on the basis of historical maps and documents. Knowledge of historical sources and access to them remain poor in China (Gu and Zhang, 2014).

Although in the early 1980s Kang pointed out the necessity of urban morphological study in urban planning and architectural design (Kang, 1982), and some of his students produced seminal works in accord with his thoughts, synchronic and diachronic analyses of urban morphology have not yet become prerequisites of urban planning and architectural design. Architects, urban planners, historians and geographers need a platform such as ISUF on which to communicate with each other and help them to bridge the gaps between their works.

Fortunately, in the last decade or so Chinese cultural identity has been highlighted. Historical studies have shown signs of coming back to an important position in architecture. There is recognition that ancient Chinese wisdom on urban construction can enlighten the contemporary world and evidence that Western theories of urban conservation are being valued. Benefiting from a succession of introductions and case studies

by scholars such as J. W. R. Whitehand, Kai Gu, Yinsheng Tian and Fei Chen, Italian typomorphological studies concerned with the hierarchy and processes of components of the built environment are being presented to Chinese researchers in a more structured way than before: concepts such as ‘operative history’ and ‘typological process’ are gaining attention. Chinese cities are at present in a transition from incremental planning to inventory planning. Urban renewal and the renovation of old buildings have gradually become important tasks of urban planners and architects, along with the redefinition of urban design. Understanding the work of Muratori and Caniggia, along with that of the Conzenian school, especially their emphasis on form, resolution and time (Moudon, 1997), should help Chinese architects to build interaction between architecture and urban morphology. This should include responsiveness to the hierarchy of elements of urban form, paying attention to the specifics of urban form and historical timing.

There are conditions that existed in the 1950s in Italy with which Chinese architects may be familiar, such as rapid urbanization, population mobility, threatened traditional urban tissues, massive amounts of public housing, and urban construction fluctuating with political pressures. At that time some Italian architects who were alert to the crisis attempted to restore architectural autonomy and commenced architectural urban morphological

studies. So what should Chinese architects be doing after the continuous growth of the Chinese economy over the past 30 years? It is to be hoped that some interesting answers will be forthcoming in the next ISUF conference, which will be in China again after a space of 7 years.

References

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Does the typological process help to build a sense of place?

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Spaces are created to accommodate human activities, so that to pursue a better quality of life (QoL) the physical environment is in need of constant change to meet evolving human requirements. However, many cities are currently suffering from a typological crisis, experiencing conflicts between the old and the new, and the neglect of local, social and cultural values. This often leads to a loss of sense of place (SoP). Major influences are mass production and the internationalization of design, technology and materials, resulting in universal architectural solutions to architecture and monotonous urban patterns. The study of urban

form, particularly the subject of typomorphology, aims to reconnect urban form with its important local values. It claims that a certain degree of continuity in the transformation processes of urban form, through a typological process, can help sustain SoP, thus benefiting people’s satisfaction with life (Chen and Thwaites, 2013; Rapoport, 1977). However, there is little empirical evidence supporting this statement. Empirical research is needed to monitor the level of SoP in relation to the transformation process of urban form so that the actual effect of typomorphological changes on people’s lives can be better understood.