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The normative impulse

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Cities exert an enormous pull on our imagination. We invest in our cities in any number of ways – mentally, physically and financially. Settlements are the product of an enormous amount of human energy and are part of us as a species – essential to our survival. Yet they also seem to remain something 'out of our control'. One way or the other we tend to show a strong sense of territory and drive to create places for our own needs. This comes out in the fascinating diversity of places, reflecting the different ways people choose to express that drive to create environments conducive to life.

One of the consequences of the deep rooted connection we have with the places where we live is a *normative impulse* in our perceptions and interpretations of buildings and cities. When we talk about places, we tend to start with what we like, or not: beautiful, ugly, fascinating, good neighbourhood, bad neighbourhood, 'not the sort of place you'd want to live'. We view places in terms of preferences and social judgements. Professionals are paid to have preferences, to say what is good or bad and what is worth the money to build.

At a broader level, the normative impulse is an expression of the fundamentally political nature of creating and changing the built environment and is rooted in our territoriality. Occupying land and putting up buildings (and tearing them down) are political acts, whether by an external power or an internal group. The preferences of those in control are the ones that are acted upon and expressed.

So if there is this almost irresistible, headlong rush toward the normative, how do we deal with the sense that cities seem out of our control, as if they have a mind of 'their' own? How do we work out who is in control if some things emerge not because of deliberate choice but as a consequence of a number of individuals' choices about something else?

The desire to understand this apparent paradox lies at the heart of urban morphology. Part of that desire is the conviction that the normative impulse, while ultimately irresistible, can at least be slowed down. We can, with effort and the right tools, temporarily suspend the impulse long enough to examine what is really going on in the built environment. Yes, it is political, but it is not only political.

There are three general sets of tools that provide the basis for suspending the impulse. The first is really just a simple, single principle: all places are worthy of our attention. To really understand what is going on, we have to remain open minded. If we exercise our preferences first, we close off the opportunity to learn and it is often the places that look the least promising that have the most to offer. We never know what problem we may face in the future and where we might find the most effective solutions.

The second set of tools is the sequence: analysis, comparison, synthesis. Comparison is fundamental to the way the brain works and overcomes the limitations of our isolation behind the veil of our senses. The strength of the methods of urban morphology as originally developed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is to make deliberate use of the comparative nature of our cognitive capacities in order to arrive at a richer understanding. That is, analysis on its own is not enough. We need to compare and bring together the results from different points of view.

The third set of tools is the sequence: description, evaluation, design. These represent a continuum between 'looking' and 'making'. Looking is not entirely passive but infused with values. A start, as a designer working with the built environment, is to see the built environment as a 'material' or 'medium' for design with technical characteristics. We should be able to investigate and speak about the characteristics of different places in a non-normative way and then move on to why we think the places do or do not work – for particular purposes in particular circumstances. The question of whether you like a place should not determine your ability to understand how it is put together and works. Even if our interest is prompted initially by a qualitative judgement, however vague, we should be capable of taking a step back to work out what is going on and why the place generates that reaction in us. Once we understand how a place works and why we like it, we are then in a better position to use that knowledge and experience in design, and get better results.

A morphological contribution to the debate on the Milan Expo area

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The conclusion of the Milan Expo in October 2015 has focused attention on how to develop the 110 ha of land on which the event took place. It presents the kind of problem that the Italian morphological school has rarely faced. The peripheral site is separated from the main urban area by a large transport infrastructure and the challenge it constitutes is not unlike that faced by Italian industrial city expansion more widely.

A proposal for restructuring the area was prepared by the Architectural Reading and Design Laboratory[1] at the invitation of the Politecnico di Milano. It provided an opportunity to test how morphological analysis can constitute not only a reading tool, but also support experimental and radical innovative design. It is based on the assumption that the reuse of the area should not be considered by itself, but in relation to its role within the north-western outskirts of Milan. Following studies of the suburbs of Rome (Strappa, 2014), the urban

fringes of Milan were also investigated as places of 'historical territory' with their own formative processes and specific shaping characteristics.

By assembling and reworking the mosaic of the first 'post-unitarian' cadastral maps (1897) the apparent disorder of the peripheral urban fabric and the confused overlapping of tracks became evident. These characteristics follow rules stemming from anthropic needs and planning intentions, indicating a close interrelation of land form, ancient Roman planning and needs arising in modern times.

The ground today between the settlements of Bollate, Rho and Settimo Milanese is mostly flat, with streams sometimes lost in industrial and residential sprawl. The Exhibition area between the Autostrada dei Laghi, the Turin-Trieste railway and Highway 33 was once the geometrical hinge between areas of different orientation. These areas, identified as 'Pantanedo'(quagmire), are clearly