Physical, social and cultural dimensions of urban morphology: redressing the balance?

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ISUF has been successful in stimulating new questions and recognizing new problems. But it needs to continue to ensure the fullest implementation of its founding philosophical basis.

Urban morphology started to take shape as an organized field of knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century (see Gauthiez, 2004; Whitehand, 2007), but it was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that an international organizing body came into existence, with the foundation of ISUF by a group of scholars with various geographical origins. The first members were predominantly geographers, architects and historians. Of course, as recalled by Davis (2014), many other academic and professional associations were also carrying out research on urban form. And many would accept the core focus of urban morphology as being 'the study of urban form' (Whitehand, 2012, p. 55), or 'the study of the city as human habitat' (Moudon, 1997, p. 3) and its aim to promote the 'dynamics of our built world' (Moudon, 1989) (see also Conzen, 2013, p. 134).

So, why was a specific group concerned with urban morphology founded at this juncture? One reason seems to have been the bringing together of relevant researchers from different disciplines, as recalled by Anne Vernez Moudon in an interview conducted by Rosaneli and Shach-Pinsly (2009).

Moudon (1989, 1994) and Whitehand (2007), among others, have identified several benefits from such interdisciplinary commitment, in particular the advantages of bringing together the Muratorian and the Conzenian Schools, with their architectural and geographical disciplinary backgrounds respectively.

However, when we look back at articles published in *Urban Morphology*, it is notable that interdisciplinary efforts within ISUF have been predominantly invested in comparing the founding schools of thought. A considerable number have been devoted to their morphological approaches, but fewer have been dedicated to their theoretical and philosophical backgrounds, in particular those of the Italian and German-English schools. This has contributed to the consolidation of ISUF and worldwide recognition of its origins. However, there is a need for more developments beyond these founding schools of thought.

Where other perspectives have been evident, for example based on Geographical Information Systems and space syntax (see, for example, Gil *et al.*, 2012; Hillier and Hanson, 1998; Koster, 1998, 2009; Oliveira *et al.*, 2015; Ye and Van Nes, 2014), the disciplines that have supported these studies are predominantly architecture, geography and planning. But several other disciplines are relevant, and these can contribute to the consolidation of urban morphology as a discipline (see Kropf, 2003, 2014) and support further methodological pluralism. In particular the social and cultural dimensions deserve greater attention.

Urban morphology as 'the study of the city as human habitat' (Moudon, 1997, p. 3) or as 'the science that studies the built physical structure, the people and the processes that have shaped such structures' (Moudon in Rosaneli and Shach-Pinsly, 2009) integrates three dimensions: (1) the physical dimension, which comprises the material aspects of the human habitat; (2) the social dimension, which enables the materialization of the physical dimension; and (3) the cultural dimension, which brings together the entire complex of human knowledge.

Within ISUF, the physical dimension has attained the greatest visibility, followed by the social dimension. However, the weight devoted to the social dimension has been comparatively small, and even less attention has been given to the cultural dimension, despite the recommendations of Conzen (1998), Gerosa (1999) and Mugavin (1999) for a repositioning of urban morphological research on a more appropriate philosophical footing – one that includes the philosophy of human culture (Conzen, 1998).

ISUF should promote the strengthening of the three dimensions identified here, and thereby reinforce its philosophical basis. To this end three suggestions are made for ISUF to implement: first, to identify common questions or problems concerning the three dimensions of urban morphology, and promote these at the next ISUF conference; secondly, communicate such an agenda to

researchers and institutions not hitherto involved in ISUF but offering further refreshing perspectives; and finally, to strengthen integration of the social, cultural and physical dimensions of urban morphology.

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Experiments in research and practice: engaging design professionals with urban morphology

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In 2012 ISUF established a Task Force to promote engagement between researchers in urban morphology and practitioners. In an interim report two key interconnected proposals were made: first to increase the influence of urban morphology 'by better packaging and marketing', and secondly to 'raise the level of understanding and application of urban morphology in a range of relevant professions through the channel of education and professional organizations' (Samuels, 2013).

Several subsequent reflections on the lack of a consistent link between research and practice have appeared in this journal, not least drawing attention to the tension between prescriptive controls for design relative to a more open process of interpretation of research material in design practice (Sanders, 2013).

Responding to this problem, two studies have been recently undertaken that have explored how morphological research can be a precursor to