
Reflections on the teaching of urban morphology

Vítor Oliveira, CITTA – Centro de Investigação do Território, Transportes e Ambiente, Faculdade de Engenharia, Universidade do Porto, Rua Roberto Frias 4200–465 Porto, Portugal. E-mail: vitorm@fe.up.pt

In a recent editorial in this journal, Whitehand (2016) addressed two fundamental and interrelated issues in our field of knowledge, the existence of courses (as distinct from parts of courses) specifically on urban morphology and the existence of textbooks on the study of urban form. While acknowledging the scarcity of both, Whitehand reported the publication of two new textbooks (Kropf, 2017; Oliveira, 2016) and reminded us of Conzen's gathering of notes, over the 1990s, for the preparation of a major book of a similar nature (Conzen, 2004).

Defining urban morphology as a basic branch of urban geography, 'Urban morphology: its nature and development' (Conzen, 2004) is structured into five fundamental aspects: i) the origins and developments of urban morphology (including the morphogenetic tradition); ii) the geospheric context of urban settlements as geographical objects of study; iii) the nature of urban morphology and its relation to other aspects of urban geography; iv) comparative studies (including the identification of general problems in cross-cultural comparisons and also of types of form complexes, in different parts of the world, showing promise for comparative study); and, finally, v) the interdisciplinary character of urban morphology (including other disciplines such as architecture, architectural history, planning, planning history and sociology). This collection of notes, edited by Whitehand, is based on Conzen's pedagogic experience in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1950s and 1960s. This rich experience is well documented in the M. R. G. Conzen Collection, in the University of Birmingham. And yet, despite the existence of this valuable resource, the systematic analysis of Conzen's teaching remains to be undertaken.

As Whitehand (2016) states, while sharing a number of similarities with the book planned by Conzen (such as the integration of different strands of interdisciplinary thought), the new books by Kropf and Oliveira also exhibit a number of differences that are partly a reflection of the different environmental and historical influences to which these authors were subject. The contents of 'The handbook of urban morphology'

are threefold: principles, methods and applications (Kropf, 2017). After considering a number of generic principles, attention is given to three types of analytical methods – desktop analysis, field survey and synthesis. The third part of the book, gathering contributions from other urban morphologists (including Oliveira), illustrates the application of morphological approaches not only into planning practice but also into the different environmental, social and economic dimensions of cities in different geographical contexts. As in the case of the book planned by Conzen, Kropf's book is based on his experience of teaching urban morphology – in his case at Oxford Brookes University (a MSc module on design for conservation), at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (a PhD seminar on urban morphology) and at University College London (occasional seminars).

Like Kropf's book and the one planned by Conzen, 'Urban morphology: an introduction to the study of the physical form of cities' is intimately related to the author's experience of teaching a course of urban morphology – in this case in different universities in Portugal (Universidade do Porto, Universidade Lusófona do Porto and Universidade do Minho), Brazil (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – part of a course) and China (University of Nanjing). The book, and the course (three different versions of 15, 30 and 45 hours have been conducted), aims at gathering the minimum and essential morphological contents that a student, or any individual, should know when addressing the physical form of cities. The contents are divided in two different parts – the first part focuses on the city, offering a reading as neutral as possible; the second part focuses on the urban morphologist.

The first part (clearly different from Conzen's and Kropf's books) starts with a basic introduction to the main elements of urban form: urban tissue, natural context, streets, plots and buildings. It then moves to the main agents and processes responsible for the transformation of urban landscapes. It reviews the long-term evolution of the physical form of cities, including consideration

of the various elements of urban form in different historical periods, and how each of these has changed over time. Finally, it offers descriptions and explanations of both inherited and emerging types of urban forms, including not only Euro-America but also Asia, South America and Africa.

The second part, closer to Conzen's and Kropf's books, focuses on how urban morphologists describe, explain and prescribe urban form. It starts with morphological description and exploration, including: i) an introduction to the classics in urban morphology and urban studies; ii) a review of the main approaches to the study of urban form – from the Conzenian school to the Muratorian school, from space syntax to spatial analysis (including cellular automata, agent-based models and fractals); and iii) a reflection on comparative studies. It then explores the link between this morphological description and explanation and the prescription of urban forms.

Evidence is provided on the incorporation of morphological concepts and methods in planning and architectural proposals and on the effective results on the ground of morphologically-based professional practice. Finally, it identifies and characterizes the most relevant contributions of urban morphology to a wider knowledge of contemporary cities and societies.

References

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