



# VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues  
in urban morphology

## Linking urban morphological and social perspectives

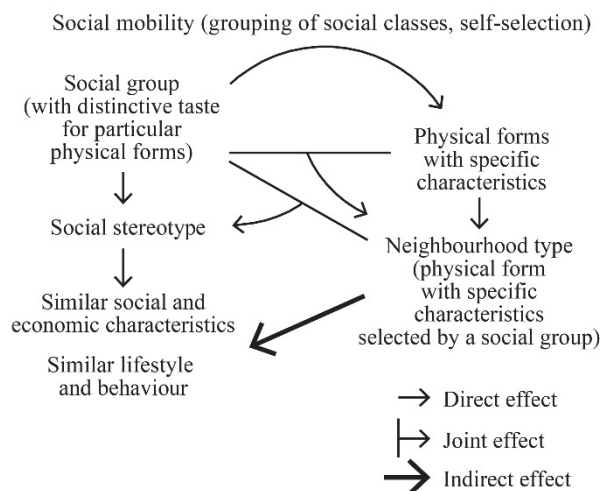
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Swedish urban morphology has a long tradition (Abarkan, 2009). Many architects and geographers have classified buildings and neighbourhoods according to architectural styles (Björk *et al.*, 2009), planning paradigms (Rådberg and Friberg, 1996) or epochs of economic and social development (Engström *et al.*, 1988). Cities such as Stockholm or Malmö have also applied neighbourhood typologies (Forshed, 1997) as background for form-based codes and building ordinances. ‘Neighbourhood type’ characterizes areas of cities that are relatively homogeneous according to a range of attributes such as age and style of development or street network (Stead and

Marshall, 2001, p. 128). The research perspective of the Swedish urban morphologists is that neighbourhood type explains not only physical variables such as number of storeys, open-space indices or floor-space indices (Rådberg and Friberg, 1996), but also population density, social structure and development tendencies (Engström *et al.*, 1988) (Figure 1).

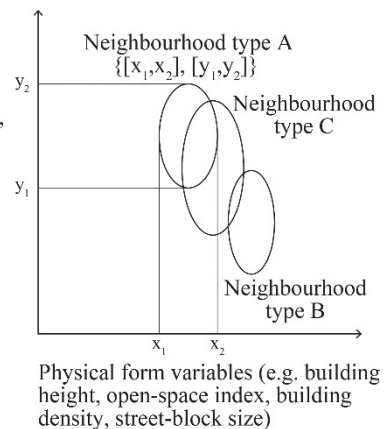
This type of perspective can be understood as two interacting layers: physical settings, and social mobility and grouping (establishment of social settings and creation of subcultures, invasion or succession of subcultures) (Fischer, 1984). Cities experience cycles of intensive development in

### A: System of habitation and social mobility



### B: Physical form preconditions human activities (lifestyles and behaviour)

Social and economic variables (e.g. residential density, subculture, salary, energy use, public transport, cycling)



**Figure 1. The link between physical form, social groups, neighbourhood types and lifestyles.**

building booms, followed by slumps (Whitehand, 1977). Technological revolutions, new planning paradigms, and social and economic transformations, for example, trigger building booms. A morphological characteristic of neighbourhoods that emerges during major building booms is the display of similar architectural styles, urban layouts, and building and transportation technologies dominant for that particular historical era (Whitehand, 2001). A new prototypical building or neighbourhood emerges and if society accepts it as preferable to others, its pattern varies and multiplies. Physical form also embeds different sets of functions non-verbally communicated (Lynch, 1981). The variation and multiplication of physical patterns produces architectural styles and neighbourhood (place) types.

Architectural styles and neighbourhood types are social constructions that society creates to simplify communication and promote values (Franck, 1994, p. 345). Through societal evaluation, historical and newly-developed neighbourhoods achieve unique social meaning and status, appealing to different strata of the population. Individuals tend to look for a typical 'dream house' and neighbourhood when they look for a residence. The preferred residential choice may be called self-selection (Fischer, 1982). Sociologists have employed terms such as 'subcultures' (Fischer, 1984) or 'housing classes' (Rex and Moore, 1969) to describe social groupings in cities. The taste for housing inspires social mobility and grouping. Bourdieu's conceptualization of social class by taste additionally helps to understand housing classes (even though Bourdieu (1979) did not focus on housing, but on consumption of products and services). Social classes are groups of agents who occupy similar positions in social space and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, are likely to have similar dispositions and interests and therefore have similar practices and adopt similar stances (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 725).

Sociologists of the Chicago School (Burgess, 1925) illustrated neighbourhoods with distinctive social groups. Today, social scientists tend to consider social associations separately from their physical settings, whereas architects, geographers and environmental scientists tend to focus on physical form and the functions it provides. The challenge is to join these theoretical frameworks. How do physical settings affect society and social groupings (subcultures, housing classes, mobility classes)? Do neighbourhood types create social stereotypes (immigrants, yuppies, car addicts,

opera lovers)? Does urban design contribute to the creation of one or many co-existing subcultures? These are questions for both social scientists and urban morphologists.

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