Towards a minimalist definition of the plot

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Throughout my time working with ISUF (since 1997) I have slowly come to recognize the need for a minimalist definition of the elements of urban form. As we expand the field of concern to the entire urban world, it is clear that the kinds of definition of form elements that are particular to a region – such as Conzen's 'plot head' or Caniggia's 'matrix route'– cannot serve as universal descriptions. Even more radically, I have come to discard the notion that the urban elements are always defined relative to each other. Rather, I see the elements of form as data points, without the relationships to other elements and uses that are so culturally varied that they cannot serve as universal touchstones. These data points describe what is on the ground, while the cultural variations are the conditions under which elements are created and change.

This is why I regard Karl Kropf's thorough and necessary analysis, 'Plots, property and behaviour' (Kropf, 2018), as a breakthrough first step to the goal of a minimal definition. In analysing the plot's common association with control or use, that is its role as defining property, Kropf identifies many cultural and physical variations. He illustrates why those variations make it impossible to have a universal definition of the plot that is tied to the idea of property.

This profound observation is critical because it untethers the definition of the plot from temporary and sometimes conflicting physical indicators, such as fences, and also the particulars of any one idea of property (for example, a plot being defined as something you own). But then Kropf swerves and ties it instead to the idea of behaviour, as in the 'plot boundaries are a socially agreed set of spatial limits on behaviour' (Kropf, p. 14).

Kropf has done all the work to clear out the false starts – plot as property or land use or that which is inside the fence – and now it is time to bring the baton even closer to home. His definition still presupposes that plots must contain the idea of the relationship between form and human behaviour. But if we are to be consistent between one kind of element and another, we need to apply this same idea to built form (buildings, structures, objects). I think we can agree, based on Kropf's voluminous work in this area, that built form is not defined by its relationship to humans (ownership, land use, control), and therefore I think we need to agree that it is also not defined by the behaviour of its occupants, owners, designers or anyone else.

Morphologists define a building by its physicality: I can see it, feel it and measure it. I do not need to know who owns it or what it does or what it means to represent it in my data on the morphology of a place. Kropf (p. 5) requires definitions to be consistent, specific, general, comprehensive, and coherent. My own minimum requirements for the definition of elements of form are that they are universal (exist in all settled places), measurable, objective (not subjective), and co-existent, as well as differentiated from each other (Scheer, 2016). To be consistent, the definitions of *plot* and *buildings* – or more broadly, *plots* and *built form* – should be similar.

This requires that we go one step further toward the goal of consistency, universality, generality, objectivity, and coherence. Detaching the human related attributes allows us to see the plot or the building for what it is, morphologically: a data point consisting only of its measurements, its location, its temporality, its status (man-made), and its classification (a plot as distinct from a building).

Thus, a minimal definition of built form is that (1) it is manmade, (2) it is solid and measurable in dimensional units and (3) it is specifically located and immobile, now or in the past. This definition does not include any attributes of ownership, use, behaviour, legal standing, or control as part of the definition. It also does not include any positional relationship to other elements of form (such as plots, street blocks, or regions) because these relationships are not universal.

To be consistent, the definition of plot should be just as minimal. Therefore, I propose that the plot is (1) man-made, as land is claimed, (2) a piece of land bounded by measurable, geographically-defined vectors, and (3) specifically located in the world now or in the past – not, for example, an ambiguous territory claimed by a tribe or a lion king.

With this definition, the plot has no 'meaning' per se, but is imbued with meaning by those who create it or use it, just as buildings have a myriad of cultural and economic attributes and meanings.

To attach and compare cultural meaning to artifacts like plots, streets, blocks, and buildings, is to analyse the data (the objectively existing artifacts) through infinite lenses of human or natural relationships. Along with identifying patterns in the data, these analyses are the primary knowledge that morphologists produce. However, identifying the objective data logically precedes analysis.

A plot is man-made in that it is created as humans claim specific pieces of land, measure them, and create boundaries. Consider a landfill that I see out my window in Songdo, South Korea – a mudflat that will soon be developed as part of the city. Mere months ago it was water, the Yellow Sea. It will soon be subdivided and registered, absolutely new land, marked with perfection using co-ordinates far more precise than previously possible. These invisible lines represent the human claim. When does the plot begin? It begins when we mark the land with a plough or with LIDAR (Oosterman *et.al*, 2006), so that (as Remus does) we can jump over abstract lines, violating the boundaries (Rykwert, 1988, p. 28**).** When the boundaries are real enough to be violated, the plot exists**.**

These measurable boundaries describe abstract space. The bounded space can be similar or dissimilar in shape and size to other plots near it, such that patterns (primarily physical) can be discerned, described, and compared to other patterns nearby or far away. The bounded space can be compared to those on the same location in history. This bounded space has varying physical relationships to object, buildings and land. The bounded space can have many other meanings and associations, including ownership, uses, mineral rights, behavioural limits, and the like. GIS demonstrates that the plot is a unit of space that can be associated with a myriad of data.

Why is the plot the problem child in urban morphology? Kropf suggests that because the plot is associated with property, its definition is unclear. In addition to that, I believe we tend to argue the definition of the plot because it is unseen, only discernible in abstract representation (maps) or approximated in physical boundaries. But as morphologists we are always studying representations – measured drawings, maps, aerial photographs, GIS polygons. These are our data. If we see something on the ground (for example, observe the axis of the Forbidden City) we later confirm our intuition through a representation – or today, we even check it on Google – because of what we see from the human view. For subjective observation to be useful it must be converted into objective information – accurate, measured, and recorded. So it is for the plot.

References

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