VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

Architectural applications based on morphological analysis

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The built landscapes that express our contemporary condition are somewhat different from the objects of our traditional studies, at least according to the Muratorian school (Strappa, 2017, 2018). Nevertheless, analysis of the inherited fabric as a morphological context is still vital. Despite the decline of historical centres, degraded by reckless use and incongruous transformations, they remain the places in which to study the deep roots of our built landscapes. Their formative processes provide lessons not only for considering the phenomenological aspects of built reality but also their explanation and possible congruent transformation.

Even though the modern city fabric has been a topic of considerable morphological study and design, one of the hardest current tasks is to interpret the phenomena generated by economic transactions on a world scale, not least the complex processes that take place at metropolitan boundaries.

The resulting structures, connecting a network of activities that apparently lack much architectural expression, should be seen as the true symbols of contemporary cities. Their important role in the urban complex is evident, but they cannot be regarded in the same way that traditional nodes link territorial routes to the wider urban matrix.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon is the form of the places produced for mass marketing. Huge shopping centres are *assembled* more than *aggregated.* They are intended for the 'assembly' of autonomous elements produced independently. By 'aggregation' the union of elements has complementary characteristics. But, even if they arise in disorder at the urban fringe, over time they acquire ever new forms of organicity.

These forms evolve inside autonomous microclimates where temperature does not change and many movements are by escalators and lifts. Here inner paths may seem to have little order, which makes it harder to interpret them. Even if official architecture is barely apparent in these places, isolated as they are by transport infrastructure, car parking and warehouses, they are, nevertheless, some of the last outposts in which traditions of modern city life continue.

Retail spaces tend to produce repeatable forms without any conscious aesthetic synthesis (Longstreth, 2000). They are, in morphological terms, actually recursive forms based on repetitions of patterns in a kind of novel 'spontaneous consciousness' (to use a Caniggian term), which produces techniques of partition, repair, maintenance and replacement.

These assemblages are not generated by an organic process of growth. The paradigms

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forming the basis of interpretation are themselves changed: the structure is created by layers that evolve through successive replacements without apparently leaving a trace and yet every form is the result of what preceded it and is, in some way, part of its transformation.

The novelty of such a process is the fact that it involves much more complex relationships than the connections with the site: it is the end point at which a number of production chains intersect; the last link in a process that starts with matter and ends with a product that the transport infrastructure delivers to the retail centre. It is much more a part of the production network than a part of the city. Its extreme seriality can be perceived through structures shaped by the need for quick assembly and dismantling. Spaces are shaped by the pragmatic exploitation of commercial areas, and by the emphasis on product visibility and customer flow.

This kind of structure should therefore be interpreted using new categories such as:

- large neutral containers intended as new forms of land appropriation applied in three dimensions;
- the concept of 'nodality' replaced by that of 'clusters'; and
- so-called 'anchors' as new kinds of node, with a different meaning from traditional ones, within a fast-changing urban fabric.

The retail space-forming process has its own unintentional aesthetic expression in the captivating system of mirror surfaces, reflecting the images of goods and human beings. This has led to picturesque interpretations (Chung *et al*., 2001). A morphological analysis could contribute to regenerating both the architecture and the surrounding environment, allowing the foreseeing of new connections linking internal structures with neighbouring fabrics, existing or to be built.

These structures and spaces have been described in a body of literature ranging from phenomenological studies based on perceptual tools to those in urban planning that systematically consider current conditions.

The architect's perspective should be different. It should consider the actual process as history and the necessary phases that will follow as the project. The term 'necessary', which seems to suggest a definite determinism, is actually the problematic part of a design. It derives not only from the logical and economic components of urban phenomena (the 'object') but also from ethical concerns linked to others by an architectural synthesis that cannot but derive from the operating subject.

Forming processes in urban morphology should not only be the tools used to understand the environment's structure: they should also be the means to transform it, in the continuous interrelationship between critical interpretation and design.

We thus need to analyse the current condition of built landscapes, considering the actual city as the result of a longstanding challenge. And these phenomena should be incorporated within the great phases of territorial transformation.

The extraordinary aspect of the contemporary condition is that new crises are not a transitional phase necessarily preceding a new equilibrium (Muratori, 1963). The useful, creative crises (symbolized by the Tower of Babel) produce an unstable and conflictual state that is a prelude to regeneration. The contemporary crisis is of the opposite kind. It is generated by the concept of networks. These have a conciliatory function, contributing to perpetuating the condition of instability. In this respect the architectural debate has long focused on reassuring generalizations, such as use of the term 'globalization'. Separated from the economic context that explains the causes, this term has become synonymous with 'ubiquitous' and 'generic'. Furthermore, the commonplace of the 'end of ideologies' has often become a worn-out mantra that justifies every spectacular output**,** regardless of the social context for which it is intended.

In such circumstances we need to look to the future transformations of new urban spaces, such as those for contemporary retailing, taking into account the current situation (how and why they produced the present contradictions). 'Updating' is the term that Muratori and Caniggia used to convey the idea of how

even radical and apparently uncontrolled changes can be traced back to general principles. Muratorian research already contains the architectural notion of 'generativity'. The same idea of type in the morphological-processual school, if correctly interpreted in a contemporary context, is a generative notion (Strappa, 2015) open to transformation and innovative design. In the case of retail space it is necessary to face the new crisis with 'open', *original* tools, since large *commercial* structures are now at the beginning of their decline owing to the irruption of e-commerce. Their uncertain transformation requires original and 'open' analytical and design tools, not considering the built landscape as an artefact, but rather as a temporary condition – as matter in a state of becoming.

References

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Heritage and townscape conservation: perspectives from urban morphology and planning practice

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A frequently discussed issue in this journal is the potential for urban morphology to engage more effectively with development planning systems (see, for example, Barke, 2015; Hall, 2013; Samuels, 2013; Thomas, 2018). One way of realizing this potential is to better understand the frames of reference and language used by the different 'actors' involved.

In England, planning permission is required from the local authority for changes of land use and other forms of development. Applications for planning permission must be determined against the policies set out in the local authority's development plan, while also considering the national government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and other material considerations. The NPPF (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019) must also be considered when local authorities prepare their development plans. Decisions to refuse planning permission can be appealed to government appointed inspectors, and decisions by local authorities and inspectors can be challenged in the courts. In addition, separate legislation governs the identification of buildings and townscapes of heritage value and their protection.

In relation to heritage, the focus of the government's policy is directed towards 'heritage assets', defined in the NPPF as 'A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest' (MHCLG, 2019, p. 67). Some heritage assets have greater status by virtue of being 'designated heritage assets', for example listed buildings and conservation areas. The NPPF is explicit regarding the overall importance of built heritage and its conservation, stating: 'Heritage assets range from sites and buildings of local historic value to those of the highest significance, such as World Heritage Sites which