



BOOK REVIEWS

The handbook of urban morphology by *Karl Kropf*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, UK, 2017, 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-118-74769-8.

Offered as a ‘practical manual for urban morphological analysis’ (p. 9) that focuses on the scale of the urban tissue, this *handbook* comprises three parts: *Principles, Methods, and Applications*.

Written in plain, concise, but precise, English, this text will reward the careful reader by laying bare complex ideas and sophisticated thinking. The well-read morphologist will enjoy the synthetic portrait proposed by Kropf, in particular with regard to the integration of complementary and analogous ideas and concepts scattered in an array of canonical texts from several morphological traditions. The command of the literature that such an exercise implies is remarkable. This should come as no surprise, since this work stems in part from Karl Kropf’s (1993) PhD thesis (under the supervision of Jeremy Whitehand). That thesis was an important contribution that focused on a comparison between, on the one hand, the theories and methods of M. R. G. Conzen (see, for example, Conzen, 2004) and, on the other hand, those of Gianfranco Caniggia, including his collaboration with Gian Luigi Maffei (see, for example, Cannigia and Maffei, 2017), another prominent follower of Saverio Muratori. In addition to Conzen’s *historico-geographical* approach and the Muratorian *typo-morphological* approach, Kropf also refers to the *configurational approach*, which is centred on the geometrical and topological attributes of built forms, and the *spatial analytical approach* – a quantitative take on cities as ‘complex adaptive systems involving a dynamic, iterative and reciprocal relationship between social and economic interactions and the physical form of settlements’ (p. 18). Further, Kropf mobilises, as complementary morphological approaches, urban

ecology; city image and townscape analysis; and geographic information sciences.

In Part One, common core concepts – pattern and structure, process of formation, type and hierarchy – are introduced and defined. After listing a set of elements for the analysis – urban tissue, the street, the plot series (and block), the route, the plot, the building, the room, the structure, the materials – Kropf introduces a diagram of his own making, in which the latter are organized in a multi-level compositional hierarchy. This progresses in complexity, namely in levels of resolution, from the materials to the tissue, including open areas and streets spaces (p. 27). It is emphasized that each element within that hierarchy can be defined by its position, by its outline and by its internal structure (comprising smaller elements). A building ‘is identifiable as a component within a plot, an object with an outline, and an object with an internal arrangement of rooms’ (p. 27). This diagram is an important contribution. Though not explicitly mentioned, perhaps due to the humility of the author, it ties together Conzen’s plan-unit concept with Caniggia and Maffei’s conceptualization of the urban tissue (the work of John Habraken (1998) and the studies of Alamo Square in San Francisco by Anne Vernez Moudon (1986) also come to mind), while filling the gaps within and between the said notions. The said diagram is exemplary of Kropf’s approach and method throughout the handbook. The notion of type is similarly introduced in plain terms as a manifestation of ‘cultural habit’ and the ‘product of learning’, as well as in synthetic and effective diagrammatic representation (p. 29). The process of formation and transformation of the built environment (p. 35) is also of interest. The second half of Part One revisits at greater length the multi-level diagram, in a discussion of the categories and their structural relationships. The object of each

category is represented through the relationships between the three main analytical viewpoints, graphically represented: the *structured spaces* (or the *voids* delineated by boundaries), the plan view, and the generic structure (the position of the element under scrutiny in the multi-level diagram). The ways in which the multi-level compositional hierarchy can be operationalized for the analysis of the built environment, in particular by determining the desired level of specificity, is discussed.

Part Two, *Methods*, is the most voluminous. It discusses successively: the general process of analysis; the so-called desktop analysis; the field survey; and the synthesis. Kropf suggests that the three basic steps of the morphological enquiry are the analysis, the comparison (synchronic or diachronic), and the synthesis. He contends that a composite view results from a 'synthesis based on experience that is developed through cycles of hypothesis, deduction and induction' (p. 15). The general process of analysis is introduced and discussed at length, from the determination of the objectives and scope of the study, information gathering, desktop analysis, field survey, and interpretation, synthesis and communication. Beyond technical and procedural aspects, different types of analysis are abundantly illustrated by borrowing from a large number of case studies. The extensiveness, richness and exemplarity of the cases illustrated are such that serious substantive knowledge can be gained on various built environments and their morphogenesis. In addition to information on what to study and how to proceed, the attentive apprentice will start building a mental repertoire of the kinds of results to expect in different contexts, and of the interpretation that could entail. Part Three, entitled *Applications*, develops the latter aspects further, by presenting case-studies that investigate different aspects of urban form in order to produce knowledge that could inform the creation, the control of the transformations, and the management of the built environment.

The publication of such a handbook in English was much anticipated. In the opinion of this reader, this is a must-read, and perhaps the best tool available in that language for the teaching of urban morphology at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

References

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- La dimensione urbana degli spazi commerciali. Il caso di Lisbona, 1970–2010** by *Alessia Allegri*, Collana Politecnica, Maggioli Editore, Milano, Italia, 2016, 123 pp. ISBN 978–88–916–1818–4.

This book stems from a PhD thesis in Urbanism and Urban Studies and seeks to decode the complexity that characterizes the relationship between retailing and the city. Alessia Allegri explores, through a typological classification analysis, how commercial spaces and the diversity of the urban fabric combine in urban evolution. This allows her to identify the morphological and functional features that influence this relationship.

The author acknowledges the links between commercial uses, urban fabric permeability, and spatial continuity, and that these relationships can be more or less worked out and controlled. She posits, however, that the historical dialogue of the retail/city binomial has been somehow compromised by the latest trends in the design of commercial spaces, which tends to produce enclosed units, unconcerned with their surrounding context and focused exclusively on their commercial vocation.

To investigate this issue, the author turns to Lisbon and its formal richness and diversity. The second chapter amply justifies the choice of Lisbon for the reader, given the crucial position that the retail spaces occupy in the organization of urban fabric, the multiple roles assumed by these over the last 40 years in particular, and the diversity of configurations that they have entailed.