

REVIEW ARTICLE

Can there be a joint venture between urban history and urban morphology?

Sylvain Malfroy, Laboratoire d'histoire de la ville et de la pensée urbanistique (LHVPU/ENAC), École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Bâtiment polyvalent, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: sylvain.malfroy@epfl.ch

Körner, Martin, ed. (1999–2000) *Stadtzerstörung und Wiederaufbau / Destruction and Reconstruction of Towns / Destruction et reconstruction des villes: vol. 1: Zerstörung durch Erdbeben, Feuer und Wasser / Destruction by earthquakes, fire and water / Destruction par des tremblements de terre, le feu et l'eau; vol. 2: Zerstörung durch die Stadtherrschaft, innere Unruhen und Kriege / Destruction by the lord's power, internal troubles and wars / Destruction par le pouvoir seigneurial, les troubles internes et les guerres; vol. 3: Schlussbericht / Final report / Rapport final* (Verlag Paul Haupt, Bern, Switzerland, vol. 1, 339 pp. ISBN 3-258-05886-5; vol. 2, 459 pp. ISBN 3-258-06141-6; vol. 3, 196 pp. ISBN 3-258-06185-8

The International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) was founded in the mid-1950s to promote comparative studies of urban heritage and, by this means, to encourage international co-operation in promoting this universal good.¹ Following the Second World War, mostly in Europe, as urban reconstruction moved into high gear, it became urgent not only to save the memory of what had been massively destroyed but also to prevent further cultural disasters by feeding the new developments with historical information and competent advising about the value of surviving structures. The ICHT has played a major role over half a century in helping form public opinion concerning the transnational importance of urban civilization. The group's most impressive editorial achievement is certainly the collection of *Historical town atlases*, which consists today of over four hundred urban monographs distributed over more than seventeen countries. The guidelines established by the Commission for minimal conditions of cross readability among the various efforts have made this still-growing documentation project an irreplaceable tool for urban history and urban morphology.²

As a member of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), the ICHT has adopted the principle of presenting a report on its scientific activities every five years, coinciding with ICHS conferences. Ironically this quinquennial research rhythm only started in Moscow, on the occasion of the thirteenth meeting of the umbrella organization in 1970! Seven major reports have been produced so far, dealing with such topics as the significance of annual or trade fairs in attaining urban status (Montreal 1995), the differences in morphogenesis and institutional prerogatives between urban extensions (*Neustädte* in German, as opposed both to *Altstädte* and *Vorstädte*) and new towns (*neue Städte*) in the medieval period (Madrid, 1990), and urban networks and urban hierarchies in the feudal territory (*Landschaft*) between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries (Stuttgart 1985). This short overview of some of the recent research programmes (a complete list is available on the ICHT website, cf. note 1) is enough to suggest how prominent medieval historiography has been until recently in the scholarly agenda of the ICHT. This may surprise people in extra-European regions

largely unaffected by the so-called 'urban renaissance' of the twelfth century or not influenced by it until many centuries later. But in Europe, not only does the built environment still display lasting features of medieval urbanism, but contemporary civil institutions also trace their origins to the burges emancipation of that period. Consequently, medieval historiography has remained suitable for the hermeneutics of space as related to changing power structures.

This context permits us to understand the refreshing novelty of the latest report, published under the title *Destruction and reconstruction of towns: destruction by earthquakes, fire and water, by the lord's power, internal troubles and wars*. It summarizes the substantial results of the quinquennial plan of 1996-2000. As the general title indicates, the initial shock in the face of the destructive power of the Second World War – for which, since its inception, the ICHT has felt obliged to compensate with a broad, mostly praiseworthy display of the historically progressive energies that contributed to make European cities cradles of innovation, economic growth, socio-political dynamism, and cultural achievement – has at long last become a specific theme of investigative interest. With respectable intellectual courage the scholars engaged in this programme have sought to address the question of whether we can conceptualize destructive events as being basic to the development of cities, and, in addition, the inculcation of responsibility for them among urban citizens, and also issues of their prevention. If historical sources could answer this question, they would underscore the vital importance of changing behaviour as a pre-condition to effective risk management. Helping to reinterpret past experience in the light of such new questions, history could contribute to change current ways of thinking about the nature of cities and also to better face the dangers that threaten them from the 'outside' as well as from the 'inside'. We will see from the stimulating contributions in these volumes that urban morphology, both as descriptive and explanatory theory of the process of city building and as prescriptive practice involved in the design and transform-

ation of built space, has much to learn along these lines.

A trilogy

The published results pursue two broad themes in two relatively autonomous parts. Volume 1 deals with 'destruction by earthquakes, fire and water', that is, with destruction by natural elements. The causal importance of nature in producing these disasters has varied historically, of course, and cannot in every case be taken entirely for granted. Volume 2 concentrates on socio-political factors of destruction, 'destruction by the lord's power, internal troubles and wars'. This runs the gamut from symbolic submission of cities with limited material losses to the massive destruction of cities not for their own sake but as a means to cripple an entire nation state. The third volume is dedicated exclusively to the 'Final Report', presenting the synthesis by Martin Körner (now regrettably deceased³), scientific editor of the whole work, in its original German version, together with integral English and French translations.⁴

Forty-three papers lay out the general agenda, surveying the whole range of time from Greek antiquity to the present day, and a spatial range encompassing the Mediterranean regions, Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and the British Isles, as well as an isolated extra-European enquiry into Japan. Cities and countries are indexed, as are personal names, in separate lists. Each contribution appears in its original language (thirteen in French, thirteen in German, sixteen in English and one in Italian). German summaries accompany all texts in other tongues. The efforts made by Körner and his assistants Niklaus Bartlome and Erica Flückiger, of the University of Bern, Switzerland, to weave a thread between the various contributions, and to seek a broad readership for the results of this ambitious research programme through a very substantial trilingual synthesis, deserve high praise. For understandable reasons of cost, the iconography is reduced to, shall we say, a comfortable minimum. However, the demanding urban morphologist, prone to relate every historical fact to a physical configuration of

inhabited space, will remain somewhat frustrated. Fortunately, the copious endnotes signal further documentation.

The usefulness of this collection as a research tool would have been increased still further by data on the authors, their specializations, and institutional affiliations. Just as a small but significant example, not every reader can be expected to know that Emanuela Guidoboni leads a private research institute in Bologna, Italy, called Storia Geofisica Ambiente (SGA Ltd), which since 1983 has pioneered studies in historical seismology and climatology, supported by considerable data banks, with a special concern for anthropogenic processes implicated in mounting environmental vulnerability.⁵ This kind of rising para-academic firm, which focuses so precisely on risk management and the educational transformation of collective behavioural patterns, is too significant in the contemporary situation (as well as for the purposes of this trilogy) to be left unmentioned. Clearly, the production of knowledge about risks has become profitable on the market of services today and need no more remain confined within public institutions.

To call this work a trilogy depends not so much on the superficial fact that it is published in three volumes, but more appropriately from the bracketing of the substantive papers by a major introduction laying out the multi-year research programme followed by the single papers, and an equally substantial conclusion, which sums up the collective findings. This formal organization of the content must be acknowledged as a powerful achievement of a carefully designed and sustained research activity – not at all self-evident for a committee that functions essentially through the goodwill of its members. One starts to dream that ISUF would soon publish its own conference proceedings in such a tripartite form!

What can urban morphologists learn from this historical overview about past attempts to manage natural and socio-political risks threatening cities?

At first glance, urban morphologists may not feel themselves immediately concerned by a

study that defines its general purpose as the aim 'to observe on a comparative level those *behavioural patterns* [italics added] of the city population that were triggered by an unexpected physical destruction of cities, total or partial, and continued until the task of rebuilding was finished'.⁶ Such an emphasis on questions belonging to the history of behaviour, public policy and local government practices, and the history of economical and technical management of resources, would seem removed from the scientific challenge of urban morphology. This field tends for its own descriptive purposes to emphasize among the historical data what happened to things, or better to the *form* of things, rather than what happened to people. In fact, the ICHT's historical report about attitudes toward risk management is welcome to urban morphology chiefly as an opportunity to deepen its self-understanding, because urban morphology, at least its Italian branch, was born as a methodology for dealing with urban damage and therefore embodies one amongst the many behavioural patterns addressed by the ICHT. As before a mirror, urban morphology has the opportunity to reflect critically on its past as a scientific discipline, as well as on its convictions and objectives. And why not also about possible future joint ventures with other disciplines?

It must be recalled here that the Muratorian school of urban morphology developed from the 1950s onward mainly as a therapeutic approach to 'traumatized' parts of cities – be they perturbations due to the violent adaptation of the traditional, 'organically grown' urban fabric to new 'abstract' regulations in matters of traffic, building safety, public hygiene, typology of public housing, for example, or be they the results of hastily improvised responses to sudden needs for large quantities of housing after such events as wars or natural disasters (such as earthquakes).⁷ Even if it cites none of them, *Destruction and reconstruction of towns* confers without doubt a new relevance to regrettably too-quickly forgotten studies such as *Edificazioni tardosettecentesche nella Calabria meridionale* (Teorema, Florence, 1975), in which Paolo Maretto outlined very interesting criteria for assessing the rebuilding policy with which the Bourbon government

sought to demonstrate its devotion to the Enlightenment following the earthquake of 1783 in Calabria, or Gianfranco Caniggia's various proposals on behalf of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for the rebuilding of Venzone in Friuli, following the earthquake of 1977.⁸

In order to show how the recent ICHT report may fertilize the theoretical debate among urban morphologists, I will mention just two issues out of the catalogue of questions systematically exposed in the Introduction by Martin Körner. The first of six main concerns is entitled 'Quantification'. It asks about the precision of our knowledge of past disasters. There is no doubt that here urban morphology can benefit directly from new research exploring, for example, how frequent city fires or earthquakes were in the past; how much time was needed for the extinguishing of large city fires or for the rebuilding of totally-destroyed cities; the severity of damage to buildings; to the urban infrastructures, and so on. The results of such comparative analyses may challenge certain hypotheses of urban morphology regarding, for instance, the continuity of urban fabric over a very long period of time. Morphological studies may also illuminate open questions regarding the impact of disasters, using the urban fabric as source of information, where archives are silent. This point seems not unduly problematic, indeed it promises very exciting future exchanges between urban history and urban morphology.

The second issue concerns 'political aspects', and addresses the measures taken by public administrations to prevent urban disasters, control the safety of constructions, organize permanent supervision, provide for sources of water in case of fire, for levees against floods, for walls and bastions in case of military assault, and so forth. The research programme appeals here explicitly for contributions by historians of technology, 'particularly in the realm of invention and military science, in conjunction with [historians] of architecture and city building'.⁹ Would urban morphologists keep the appointment? Do they have special methodological resources which would make such a division of labour profitable? Historians are here mostly interested in the complex processes of decision-making

which are situated upstream of the effective results of political and administrative actions. There is no question that urban morphology pays attention in its own analyses to all such types of infrastructure produced in cities over time and periodically adapted to increased need for protection, such as by defensive walls, ditches, gates, bridges, party walls in masonry, etc. But currently these features are not examined primarily in the light of their political or administrative background, nor evaluated according to their technical performance. They are treated rather because of their importance in physical scale or their inertia in time, both aspects that influence the relative flexibility of urban structures for physical change and have an impact on the whole consecutive city growth process.

On the difficulty of linking the concepts of event and process – or achieving an effective joint venture between urban history and urban morphology

Urban morphology is congenitally reluctant, in fact, to consider that political or administrative decisions regarding the shaping of cities could fit without any distortion the real conditions for their execution. The kind of conceptualizations in which urban morphology traditionally trusts pay less attention to what people consciously meant to do than to their effective products, whether or not they are unconscious contributions to dialectical processes in which the roles of subject and object can never be definitively assigned. What urban morphologists feel as their scientific challenge is not to track the correspondence in the city between built forms and human decisions (whether collective or autocratic), but just those factors of distortion which have their origin in the urban structure itself and remain often hidden to the stakeholders at the time they are acting. The efforts expended by urban morphologists to grasp and display these specific causal factors for a better understanding of the way urban forms change over time have produced convincing results. But, sometimes, this purpose decays to an ideological praise of the city as product of an exclusively anonymous building process assimilated to a popular

culture, which should be protected against interference from distant centres of decision or abstract technocratic powers. This tendency to conceptualize the development process of cities in 'organic' terms, according to models carelessly borrowed from the natural sciences, could find an appropriate antidote in historical accounts like the present one, which show that, under certain conditions, catastrophic events triggered lasting consequences for building practices in the city (the etymological meaning of Greek *katastrophê* is precisely the idea that events have the power to turn the direction of a development and to 'make epoch', that is, to break the continuity of a process, as is meant by the Greek word *epokhê*).

Urban morphologists are used to dividing the forming process of cities into 'morphological periods' and thus demonstrating awareness of the possibility of historical breaks. But the key role played by the idea of 'organism' in morphological theory – that is, by the representation (normative, rather than hypothetical) that innovation *must* be entirely explicable by the immanent resources of the urban system – prevents urban morphologists from accepting that new directions in urban development be understood, and also rationally legitimated, as socially-organized reactions to catastrophic events and as technical, state-of-the-art attempts to prevent future occurrences. This may lead to a fear, then, that an increasingly specialized, technically demanding and therefore expansive building modus has begun progressively to supplant traditional, so-called 'basic building',¹⁰ rooted in the popular collective culture evoked above. The logical result that cities today be considered safer than in the past, from the perspective of construction, but at the same time perhaps have become alienated from their inhabitants, is a further question also worth reflection.

At any rate, the more descriptive historical approach of observing, in the present case, how people have dealt with urban disasters, and the more normative-critical morphological approach of assessing what has been achieved

by comparing the relative performances of spatial arrangements before and after public intervention, are complementary and will benefit from further dialogue. The Körner collection provides a rich basis for pushing such inquiries further.

Notes

1. <http://www.historiaurbium.org>
2. http://www.wien.gv.at/english/historictowns/en_leit.htm
3. For an obituary of Professor Körner (1936-2002), see Stercken, M. (2003) in *Newsletter of the International Commission for the History of Towns* 23, 12.
4. Readers with good German may leave the third volume, for its content appears first, and without significant difference, as introductions to the two main volumes. The final report is useful primarily for those who need the French or English translations or would content themselves with the excellent synthesis, without a deeper interest in the individual studies.
5. <http://www.sga-storiageo.it>
6. See vol. 3, p. 81.
7. Cf. the chapter dedicated to the teaching and the thought of Saverio Muratori by Caniggia in Montuori, M. (1988) *Lezioni di progettazione, 10 maestri dell'architettura italiana* (Electa, Milan).
8. Caniggia, G. (1977) 'Elementi condizionanti il restauro e la ricostruzione', in Regione autonoma Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Servizio dei Beni Ambientali e Culturali, ICOMOS: *L'esperinza internazionale nella conservazione dei beni culturali nelle zone terremotate*, Istituto italiano dei castelli, Sezione Friuli-Venezia Giulia, 109-115; also Caniggia, G. (1997) *Ragionamenti di tipologia* (Alinea, Firenze) (with English summaries by N. Marzot).
9. See vol. 3, p. 81.
10. Caniggia, G. and Maffei, G.L. (2001) *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* (Alinea, Firenze).