

ISUF Task Force on Research and Practice in Urban Morphology: an Interim Report

In January 2012, the President of ISUF invited me to chair a Task Force to report on ways in which ISUF could build 'better bridges between researchers in urban morphology and practitioners'. The Task Force would engage in 'a discussion of ways in which ISUF could provide leadership in this sphere and draw up a report with concrete suggestions for action'.

An interim report was submitted to the President and considered by the Council of ISUF at its meeting on 15 October 2012. This report and additional matters relating to it that were raised during the course of the Nineteenth International Seminar on Urban Form held in Delft, The Netherlands are summarized below.

1. The Task Force

Over a period of 7 months the Task Force engaged in an exchange of views, comments on drafts and transmissions of relevant documents. A great deal of material was drawn from work published in *Urban Morphology*. Contributions were made by Pedro Buraglia (Colombia), Maria Adriana Gebauer Munoz (Chile/Mexico), Karl Kropf (UK), Michael Lin (Taiwan), Teresa Marat Mendes (Portugal), Stephen Marshall (UK), Nicola Marzot (Italy), Art McCormack (Republic of Ireland), Vítor Oliveira (Portugal), Vicente del Rio (USA) and Jeremy Whitehand (UK). The work of the Task Force continues and will include further contributions from East Asian countries, Australasia and parts of Europe not yet represented on the Task Force

2. This report

Our exchanges have already ranged over a wide field. Some contributions have proposed additions to the body of knowledge represented in urban morphology, but this summary has been restricted to the body of urban morphology as it stands at present.

There are two intentions behind the following proposals which can be considered as two *interconnected* parts. The first is to increase the influence of urban morphology by better packaging and marketing. The second is to raise the level of understanding and application of urban morphology in a range of relevant professions through the channels of education and professional organizations.

3. The recommendations

The recommendations can be summarized under four heads: (A) the publication of a manifesto setting out the benefits of using urban morphology; (B) the compilation and publishing of relevant curricula in different countries; (C) the production of a good practice catalogue of how and where urban morphology is being used successfully; and (D) the creation of an urban morphology tool kit for understanding the past and planning the future of urban settlements.

Four general considerations relevant to all these items emerged as a result of discussion during the ISUF 2012 conference in Delft:

1. It is important that the outcomes of the various activities of the Task Force are relevant to the dynamic and rapidly urbanizing contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as North America and Europe.
2. The utility of the electronic and imaging tools now available must be recognized and incorporated in the outcomes.
3. Urban morphology must be shown to be relevant to concerns about environmental performance.
4. The results of the deliberations need to be useful at different scales, including those of the city region, both for environmental reasons and because of the practicalities of the way in which labour and housing markets operate.

A. The ISUF manifesto

In the environmental professions there is a strong tradition of ideas being promoted through charters or manifestos, some of which have had enormous influence and have been very effective means of promoting ideas – for example, those of CIAM, New Urbanism and the Futurists. The ISUF manifesto, however, would not

advocate a style but an approach to understanding. Its preparation would be an important step in moving urban morphology from the academy to the studio.

Given the diversity of ISUF, a manifesto will be more likely to achieve consensus if it is articulated after common ground has been established based on agreed principles. It should be prepared, with professional advice, by a relatively small team over a short period.

B. Urban morphology in the curriculum

Since most urban morphologists acquire a good many of their approaches and techniques during formal training, it is important that the contents of urban morphology are communicated in higher education institutions, professional courses, continuous professional development and secondary schools.

Given that a majority of ISUF members have academic affiliations, it should be practicable to obtain basic information on urban morphology within formal curricula through the ISUF membership, though of course it will be necessary to undertake translations. The results could be published on the ISUF website, and used to demonstrate the extent of the incorporation of urban morphological concepts in education and to persuade others to adopt them.

C. The good practice catalogue of how and where urban morphology is being used successfully

This recommendation is closely connected to recommendation D and would directly feed into it. Drawing on the expertise developed by a range of disciplines, urban morphology has been used across the whole spectrum of professional activity from the description of the historical evolution and character of places to prescribing future changes through design guidance, codes and plans at different scales.

The most valuable contribution urban morphology can make is to an objective understanding of urban form and how it has evolved. It is therefore most valuable in the descriptive/analytical part of the spectrum of professional activity – before the introduction of sets of values, which must be implicit if not explicit in any form of prescription. It should be used to underpin the normative processes involved in planning and design.

A good practice catalogue therefore forms a tool kit from which practitioners can select those tools that are most appropriate to their current problems and which can be adapted to fit different economic, political, cultural and social contexts.

The catalogue would be a catholic compilation of projects that have successfully used aspects of urban morphology at different scales and in different contexts, ranging from characterization/historical studies through regulatory tools to the design and implementation of projects.

However, as the science of urban form, urban morphology, like other sciences, must be subject to evaluation and testing. This is particularly important if its utility and effectiveness are to be demonstrated to sceptical practitioners. This is a complex issue, but systematic evaluation is fundamental if the scientific credibility of ISUF and the high academic reputation of *Urban Morphology* are to be maintained. The catalogue should focus on the way urban morphology has contributed to the success of projects. Commentaries on the projects should offer guidance on the instruments that would be successful in particular contexts (legal system/planning system/development industry/professional structure) and in given conditions, thus avoiding the trap of ‘policy tourism’.

The important series in *Urban Morphology* on the study of urban form in different countries has not on the whole been concerned with the application of urban morphological concepts in practice. This series needs to be extended to cover successful applications of urban morphology in practice.

A further extension of this strand of activity would be to establish a practitioner network to exchange experiences and establish a register of professionals in the field.

D. The urban morphology manual

Urban morphology as the science of urban form can offer a range of tools to a number of groups:

1. Those concerned with describing and analysing urban form (urban historians, geographers, heritage professionals).
2. Environmental design professionals concerned with prescribing the future (architects, planners, urban designers, landscape architects).
3. The clients or employers of both these groups, notably public authorities and developers.

The ‘map’ of urban morphology published by Gauthier and Gilliland (2006) can offer a framework for defining the extent of the field. Methods such as those of space syntax and New Urbanism, which are included

on the map, have already been effectively packaged and marketed. There is a need, however, to discuss how the various schools of thought in urban morphology are related.

Currently the work of planners and heritage professionals seems to be dominated by procedural matters – certainly in the UK and international agencies such as UNESCO. This seems to be a more serious problem than in other professions. The way other professions, such as medical practitioners, disseminate the results of research and oblige their members to keep abreast of relevant research may offer possible models. It is important that professionals feel obliged, and see it as in their interests, to keep up to date.

Given that even the terminology of urban morphology is often understood by only a few, it is important to offer the practitioner and the student a manual that covers in a synthetic and comparative way the whole field of urban morphology and does not seek to promote a particular school of thought. To date the only work that attempts to be fairly comprehensive is *Morphologie urbaine* (Allain, 2004). We therefore recommend to ISUF that this gap in knowledge be filled by the production of a publication that synthesizes in an accessible form the whole scope of urban morphology. An important source of material for this publication would be *Urban Morphology*.

The publication must include:

1. Copious illustrations – all the most influential design publications (at least those in English) have been highly illustrated.
2. Connections made with other techniques at the edge of the Gauthier/Gilliland spectrum.
3. Comparisons of different methods so that the practitioner can select the most appropriate.
4. Consideration of non-traditional built form.
5. Cases that demonstrate the utility of urban morphology through specific applications that can be transferred to other contexts.
6. Clear instructions for the explanation of the historical evolution of places as a powerful way of involving non-professionals in a locality and its future.

Next steps

Given the size of the Task Force and the interest it has already generated from potential new members, two administrative steps should be noted here:

1. Because of the range of tasks and the various interests, experience and expertise of the Task Force members, a structure is being considered that allocates responsibilities to groups of members according to their interests and relevant experience. As a first step members could express their particular interest in contributing to the items identified in this report. This would not preclude members contributing to all the tasks if they wish.
2. A 'Dropbox' has been established to expedite the effective circulation of materials.

End note

Given the trepidation with which the majority of practitioners approach urban morphology and the demonstrable ignorance of even those professionals apparently familiar with it, in the words of André Gide:

Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.

References

Allain, R. (2004) *Morphologie urbaine: géographie, aménagement et architecture de la ville* (Armand Colin, Paris).

Gauthier, P. and Gilliland, J. (2006) 'Mapping urban morphology: a classification scheme for interpreting contributions to the study of urban form', *Urban Morphology* 10, 51-66.

Ivor Samuels, Urban Morphology Research Group, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. E-mail: ivor.samuels@googlemail.com