

Twenty-Fourth International Seminar on Urban Form, Valencia, Spain 27–29 September 2017

At the opening of the conference, José Salvador (City of Valencia), Iván Cabrese (Director, School of Architecture, Polytechnic University of Valencia) and Vicente Colomer (Conference Chair), set an ambitious agenda for the conference with a call to combine a global understanding of the world with a local reading of ‘place’. The first

keynote speaker Giancarlo Cataldi (University of Florence) took us on a diagrammatic journey to set the stage for a general theory of urban morphology (Figure 1). He showed that urban morphology can be divided into four processes that should be seen as integrated parts: *reading* urban form, *projecting* new concepts, *materializing* these concepts,

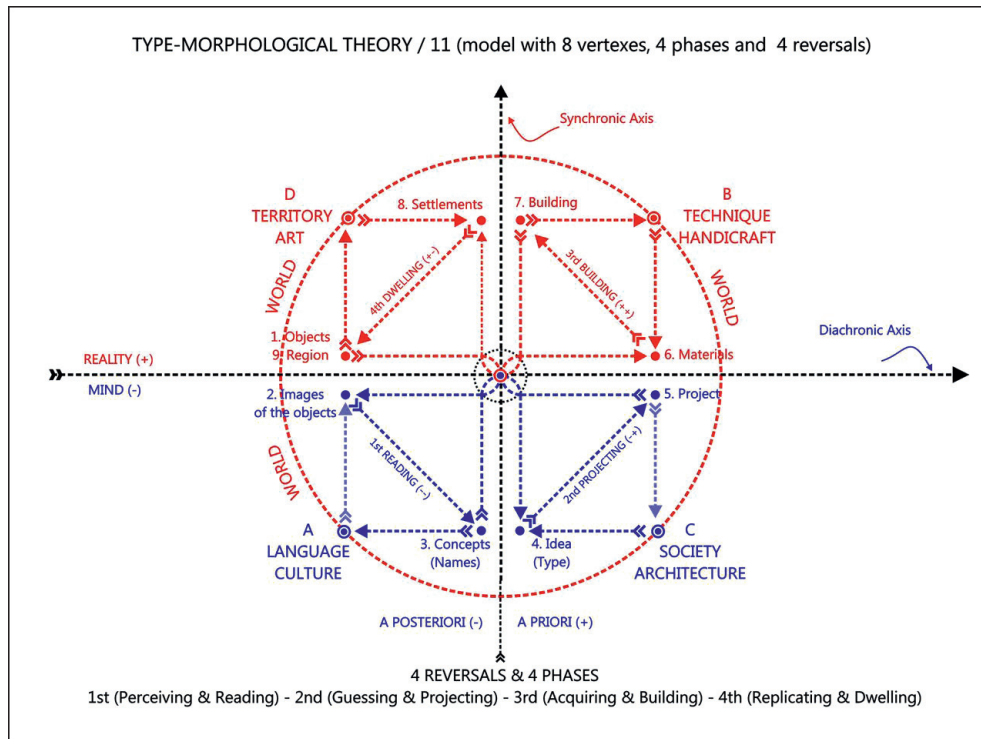


Figure 1. Cataldi's basis for a general theory of urban morphology.

and *lived* space. The diagrams were intriguing, but at first sight so full of concepts and relations that few could grasp their depth. They reminded me of the diagrams published by Marshall and Çalışkan (2011) in which they mapped the theoretical contributions within the framework of urban morphology and design and made a distinction between recognition, design, construction, and making.

The second keynote speaker, Joan Busquets (Harvard University and Centro Universitario de Diseño de Barcelona) addressed the secrets of 'good cities'. His hypothesis was that more regular cities are better for the future and the gridded city seems to be the answer, though he did not explore the performance of such patterns in comparison with less regular ones.

The third keynote speaker on this packed first day was Bárbara Pons, an architect and consultant in sustainable planning and landscaping. She presented the challenges our urbanizing planet is facing, from inequality to ecosystem stress. Anyone following my work must know that the two spatial issues she put on the ISUF agenda are important to me. The first was the problem of *scale* that she claimed needs to be addressed to enable inclusion of the environmental dimension in our work. In a way she referred back to the opening words of

Vicente Colomer in which he pleaded for study of local and global dimensions simultaneously. To do so, one needs (in my words) to read cities as systems in which the local can only be understood by understanding the context or, as Muratori formulated it, as part of the city as organism (Panerai *et al.*, 1999). Also the theory of space syntax (Hillier and Hanson, 1984) is grounded on this parts-and-whole discussion and could enrich discussions in urban morphology.

The second issue that Pons raised was the matter of *quantity*, where density plays a central role. She showed a worrying diagram (Figure 2) of decreasing densities in cities all over the world despite knowledge that higher densities are needed, for example to reduce CO₂ emissions, energy consumption and land fragmentation (Berghauer Pont and Haupt, 2010). Her presentation was calling out for us to think in terms of city performance and make our cities part of the solution instead of the problem. It complemented well the presentation of Busquets, but what was lacking was urban form!

The keynote presentation by José Luis Vallejo (founder of *ecosistema urbano*) put people at the centre of the stage and argued for interactive design in which architecture and users are in constant dialogue. His work is about participatory

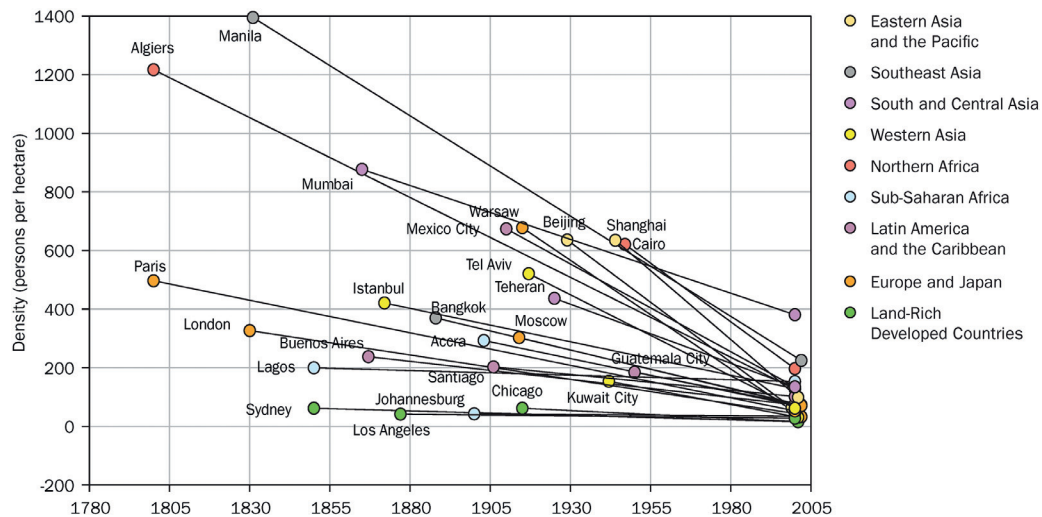


Figure 2. Decreasing population densities in urban areas in 25 representative cities, 1800–2000. Source: Angel (2011, p. 23) *Making room for a planet of cities* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy).

processes, but this does not necessarily inform us about the performance of the buildings. It is more about construction than recognition to use the words of Marshall and Çalişkan (2011).

The two last keynote speakers were Luis Alonso de Armino (Polytechnic University of Valencia) and Javier Monclus (University of Zaragoza). Armino's discussion of the exceptional quality of the extension plan of Valencia (1907) was reminiscent of Busquet's 'good city' (meaning regular city). Javier Monclus recommended that our practice should be informed by planning history and theory. Believing that one solution, such as the regular or gridded city, can provide universal solutions to the challenges we are facing is, in this light, somewhat naïve.

Summarizing this series of keynote presentations, the *challenges* to our cities were addressed loud and clear. However, little was said about what the *answers* could be in urban form (other than gridded cities). Another matter I cannot refrain from commenting on was the dominance of male keynote speakers (five compared with only two females). Evidently this is another challenge for the ISUF community to work on, but this should be a much easier one.

As far as the parallel sessions were concerned, it was hard to get an overview when 10 sessions were often taking place in parallel. Approximately 360 presentations were given in 60 sessions, leaving us all with the feeling that we had missed a lot. I listened to many interesting papers in which

the quantification of urban form and the use of big data and statistics were central. I see this as a clear revival of what Moudon (1992) described as space-morphology, in which she included the seminal work on *Urban space and structures* by Martin and March (1972) and *The social logic of space* by Hillier and Hanson (1984). The presented work covered new measures of urban form (for example by Hanzl *et al.*, and Marcus *et al.*), GIS driven analytical tools (for example, by Vialard, and Iranmanesh *et al.*) and the development of typologies using advanced statistics (for example, by Stojanovski, and Fusco *et al.*). Often these sessions triggered lively debates in which the audience raised questions about the lack of qualitative methods and about how the work described related to earlier work within the various schools of urban morphology and, in turn, the impact it might have. These are relevant questions and should be addressed more frequently where comparisons between methods (such as Monteiro *et al.* presented), integrations of methods and relations to theory (such as Marcus *et al.* addressed) are ways to proceed and advance the field.

In the closing session, the new President of ISUF, Wendy McClure (University of Idaho), gave a striking view of where we have come from, referring to the first ISUF President Anne Vernez Moudon and the founding mission of ISUF 'to create a forum to accumulate, disseminate and share knowledge about urban morphology'. This inspiring conference definitely lived up to this mission.

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