



Briefing Paper 4

Relational-Material Approach to Urban Morphology

A relational-material approach aims to establish productive linkages between analytical approaches to physical urban form and qualitative research practices engaging in social space.

Urban morphology cannot be grasped by and translated into Cartesian coordinates – urban morphology is also a political arena and lived social space. It can be explained by its social, political and cultural context and by the relations between people and objects, both at a given moment of time and in the course of history (cf. Tornaghi and Knierbein 2015). A relational-material approach engages with urban morphology as a conceptual and

empirical framework for researching the complexity and the many contingencies of socially produced urban space. As a dynamic production process it allows educators to design, develop and reflect on social innovations in urban design and architecture through processes of co-creation with both institutional and non-institutional actors as well as multiple publics towards shaping new material structures with particular sensitivity towards spatial and territorial needs of minority groups.

A relational-material approach to urban morphology does not yet constitute a school of thought or a settled approach. It can rather be considered a research endeavour stemming from the field of urban studies which aims at establishing linkages physical urban form and social space. In the field

Key ideas

- Urban fabric is shaped by and shapes the lives of people who produce it. This means that, in turn, the urban fabric materializes not only by design and construction in various degrees of regulation and (in)formality, but also through the settling of plural dimensions of mundane everyday life, political struggle, as well as visible and invisible structural (pre)conditions.
- Urban morphology as a material dimension of the production of space contains sediments of past social struggles and desires. It also occupies a prominent position in negotiations on the current urban conditions.
- Creating knowledge on urban morphology by combining qualitative inquiry into dynamics of the production of spatial configurations and epistemological challenges identified in the body of research on public space.

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Hypotopia, October 2014. The students of TU Wien created a model of a city which visualizes a possible architecture that could have been built with the money that the state used to bail out one of Austria's troubled banks. Morphology is not only a background for social life, it is also a means of anchoring abstract figures and processes (of capital accumulation) in tangible space, as well as a medium of negotiating possible futures.

of urban morphology, such endeavours have generally built on research and activist accounts from the 60s, such as Kevin Lynch's examinations of interactions between urban dwellers and urban forms, Jane Jacobs's activism mobilized around the metaphor of the 'sidewalk ballet', or on Werner Durth's reflections on the relation between everyday life and urban design. These accounts have disapproved of functionalist and rationalist views of urban space as a passive container, within which social life (eventually) unfolds. They have further taken action- and

praxis-based theories of the spatiality of social relations (relational space) as a step forward in understanding the multiple linkages between social space and the built environment. These have situated social life at the heart of the analysis of material urban forms (Hillier and Hanson 1984; Murdoch 2006). Material urban form is not simply a neutral background against which social life develops, but rather a continuously emergent materiality of social relations. Thereby the human body is emphasized as a key reference point for understanding dynamics of

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mutually formative relations between the material urban form and urban cultures through which lived space of a city materializes, including routines, actions, cultural expressions and design processes (cf. Lefebvre 2014 [1947]).

Empirical work that explores specific relations between material urban form and society generally engages in spaces of everyday life. Jean-François Augoyard's (2007 [1979]) ethnographic study of social life in a Grenoble's residential neighbourhood constructed on modernist principles is an influential contribution to the methodological toolkit for researching individuals' lived experiences of and within urban form. Not only did he introduce qualitative (ethnographic) research methods into a professional field largely relying on quantitative data and visual representations, but he has also articulated knowledge of everyday life as a necessary means for understanding the logic behind the transformation of urban form. In the early 2000's Setha Low has introduced the conceptual framework of 'spatializing cultures' to integrate social production and construction of space. Based on the sediment of ethnographic research of a complexity of daily interactions between people and the materialities of urban space, she has conceptualized 'embodied space' as a model for understanding the creation of place through a feminist focus on corporality and subjectivity. Embodied space is "the location where human experience, consciousness and political subjectivity take on material and spatial form" (2017: 95) and which therefore "can communicate, transform and contest existing social structures" (2017: 94).

In view of new requirements for engaging in the complexity and the many contingencies of socially produced urban space, public space has emerged as one of the key conceptual and empirical research frameworks. This is where people's unequal experiences of urban form can be grasped, and where meaningful changes are produced. "At no point can there be a final shape of the city", states Madanipour (2010, 12) and thus explains that the morphology of a city is constantly produced and reproduced and that we can only take visual snapshots of this socio-historic process, while never being able to

fully and completely grasp its morphology. A plurality of experience-based approaches take on the challenge of exploring and engaging in lived public space. Jones et al. (2016) draw on the concept of the 'atmosphere' for their ethnographic research of dynamic qualities of individual and shared experience of place. For Porta et al. (2010) the concept of 'informal participation' is central to understanding the situated position of human agency within morphological changes in an evolutionary perspective, as well as for translating the insights into dynamics of the production of centrality into processes of direct and collective design/ construction.

Public space morphology certainly cannot be grasped or modelled using only Cartesian coordinates, because public space is not only material form but always as well a set of social relations and social (inter)actions (Lehtovuori 2010), and thus, a lived space. People's social, cultural and political agency to transform spatial form have been at the core Jeffrey Hou's work, even though not explicitly situated in the field of urban morphology. Hou (2010) describes how the urban fabric is shaped by and shapes the lives of people who produce it, emphasizing the acts of appropriation of space as a means of fostering the community's agency. He argues that public space is created or enacted by people who engage in countless actions of spatial performance and encounter. Sunday picnics by Filipino domestic workers who on a weekly basis occupy the atrium of Norman Foster's HSBC Hong Kong building create a convivial public space of meeting and exchange at the most extraordinary place, the entrance to the headquarters of a global financial institution. Both individual and public agency are entangled in this process of producing places that empower cross-cultural learning and exchange (Hou 2010).

As the work on lived space deals with the ambivalent relations between majority and minority society which are materialized in practices and spaces of inclusion and exclusion, it is our aim to tackle silences and absences of those whose voices are not heard and who seem not to have social, cultural or economic capital to execute power over space. A plurality of interests, identities and lived practices shape urban morphology. This finding,

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in turn, is central to past experiences and anticipation of future developments. Urban morphology is therefore both a means of modelling and an essential object of inquiry into asymmetries that shape power relations (and the spaces they interweave) within socially produced urban space. It is also a medium for making a meaningful difference in spaces of socially concerned architects, designers and planners. Two traditions of thought are central to positioning our approach to urban morphology: conceptualizations of space as a material process of capitalist urbanization (spatial dialectics drawing on Henri Lefebvre's oeuvre) and emancipatory education formulated by Paulo Freire (1996 [1970]), alongside with Ali Madanipour's feminist-inspired approach to the urban design of public spaces (2003), both in theory and praxis.

In Lefebvre's 'Critique of Everyday Life' (2014 [1947]), alienated conditions of everyday life shaped by rational modes of production and consumption are contrasted with qualitative social relationships based on meaningful experiences of bodily encounters, interaction and exchange. Lefebvre therefore refers to the social form of space occupied by bodies performing affective practices and joining into collectives as a site for meaningful resistance and change concerning alienating urban conditions (cf. Shields 1999: 100-103). The access of (emancipated) urban dwellers to public and lived urban space, which Lefebvre defines as 'social centrality', has become one of the main concerns in urban studies that works in a transdisciplinary way thus combining theory and praxis.

A critical insight into the political, economic and social practices of both institutional and non-institutional actors uncovers their tendency towards producing the 'other'. Emancipatory education and critical pedagogy formulated by Freire (1996 [1970]) provide a methodological framework for planners and designers to engage in the politics of urban morphology by building on the achievements of past emancipatory struggles. It allows for creating change by empowering marginalized social groups and multiple publics to undertake actions which are embedded in the local context and are attentive to lived cultural differences.

Tornaghi and Knierbein (2015) introduce various methodological approaches for engaging with the social relations that unfold in and through public space, and for translating insights from public space into representations of space. Knierbein and Videman (2018, forthcoming) further discuss methodologies for enhancing the capacity of research and planning to engage in emancipatory potentials of lived space, and stimulate positive changes in urban form through professional involvement with communities and their spaces. This contribution underlines the political dimension of urban form, discussing different degrees of power people have in shaping their lived space and urban experience, concerning the questions of class, culture, gender, income, ethnicity, educational background etc. Public space is articulated as lived space of a plurality of particular memories, cultures and experiences, which might be institutionalized, contested, discriminated against, marginalized or rather invisible. We claim it is important to recognize the role of cities in constituting and mobilizing differences – these are reflected in urban morphologies and user conflicts over its transformations (Tonkiss 2013).

Key concepts

Urban morphology as a continuously emergent materiality and material culture of social relations.

This concept is rooted in theoretical approaches, which highlight a relational-material conception of space, enhancing a perception of space as "the material process of social production" (Goonewardena 2012, referring to Lefebvre 1991). According to this rationale, space is embodied and enacted, is appropriated and co-organized, and is given through symbolic and affective encounters in everyday life. As Hiernaux-Nicolas (2004: 15) has depicted: "Social relations (...) only gain real existence in and for space. Their support is material" (own translation).

Urban morphology as a process of spatialization

Urban morphology as a process of spatialization encompasses designed space, a domain of mental production of abstract space and materialities of everyday life. A plurality of lived practices shape urban morphology, thus, social relations already materialize

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before architects sketch a draft, before planners draft a map. Urban morphology, in this sense, is always in flux. In the post-disciplinary field of urban studies, we use urban morphology as an analytical entry perspective to track down social change through transitions of the built environment. This allows to scrutinize qualitative shifts as regards societal change: changes in the social, cultural and political dimensions of processes of urbanization. It also enables to analyse urbanization in relation to the recent modes of capitalism, and to revisit approaches to deep space, but also to uneven development of space (Smith 2008 (1984)).

Urban morphology as an epistemological opportunity
Urban morphology as an epistemological opportunity to track down and understand social change by researching transformations of the built environment. Thinking of public spaces as spaces of cultural encounters and knowledge production: empirical enquiries into palpable materiality of everyday life can be productively connected to abstract theories and scientific debates on urban morphology.

Experiential learning about the city.

Under the dictate of economic doctrines and efficiency, planning regulations and design practices often disregard asymmetries in power relations within socially produced urban space thus (in)directly reinforcing exclusionary spatial configurations. Spontaneous, intuitive and affective dimensions of social relations are given as much as emphasis as their rational, strategic and pragmatic aspects. Today, urban designers seem to more engage in places of sharing that radiate a sense of care. The value of this kind of work does not necessarily lie in the quality of conceived or materialized final design, but rather in enacting an inclusive design process as lived space which connects to people's experiences and expectations, and thus to their multiple lived spaces. Socially innovative design practice, therefore, is collectively organized and carved by needs and aspirations of diverse publics, with particular emphasis on the needs of minority groups and those whose demands are often overruled by consensual decision-making.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a practice of shared production of knowledge which is directed at discovering, recognizing and empowering a variety of social practices in a certain place, and putting them to public scrutiny and debate to encourage meaningful social change (cf. Kesby et al. 2007). Such an approach would be both sensitive to different social, political and cultural realities and capable of building bridges between them. PAR calls for a collaborative work which benefits the community. This also means that researchers must continuously reflect on their own relationship with the researched subjects and partners, including the motivation to engage with their issues. In view of this approach, urban morphology can be understood as a never completed learning environment that blurs the boundaries between designers and users, carries a capacity to perpetually involve affective geographies and political passions towards inclusive and democratic processes of shaping the city.

Methodology

The established research on urban morphology contributes interpretative tools and skills for analysing configurations of physical space. Its analytical framework and methods are mainly based on visuals and quantitative data. The aim of the relational-material approach expands on a mainly qualitative analysis with consideration of epistemological challenges that have been recognized in public space research. Relational approaches conceive of urban morphology as a material evidence of dynamic urbanization processes (as a formant of the social history of capitalism). Urbanization processes consist of fluid and complex relations among people and their places, as well as design and planning processes that partly produce the built environment. Social relations materialize in the lived geographies of our cities, and are thus an integral part of research into processes of urbanization. Urban morphological analysis can be understood as targeting particular snapshots (in terms of time) of these urbanization processes.

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The relational-material conceptualization of urban morphology sets a particular challenge for developing adequate methodologies to further explore the given complexities of the social production of space, thereby recognize the existing asymmetries of power relations in processes of space production. Such an approach calls for explorative research practices that are open in terms of result. It simultaneously encourages the spontaneous, intuitive and affective dimensions of social relations as much as their rational, strategic and pragmatic aspects.

Methods are usually centred on qualitative socio-empirical

case study research, combined with quantitative data on the case's sociospatial context. Our transdisciplinary pedagogy rests on the triangulation of methods from different disciplinary fields (sociology, ethnography, political science, critical pedagogy, urban geography, cultural studies, the arts, planning, architecture, landscape architecture, etc.). Through an interaction with research subjects on the themes of urban morphology, such as prevailing patterns, forms or symbols that shape lived space, we aim to inquire into traditions and cultural difference, thus reflecting on urban morphology as a medium and means for maintaining and challenging power relations.

Further reading

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EPUM is an international research project which aims at the integration of different urban form research and teaching approaches through pedagogic innovation and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The activities of this 28 months project (2017-2020) are funded by Erasmus+ and focus on the development of an innovative, open and inclusive system of teaching and training in urban form from a multidisciplinary perspective, capable of enabling the current and future generation of planning and design professionals to address comprehensively and effectively the variety of issues and challenges faced by contemporary cities. This website provides information about the project activities to partners and to other parties interested in the work of the project.
