
This collection of essays on urban form in Portugal is comprised of nine chapters, by different authors. The topics covered are the urban fabric, the impact of topography, urban grids, the square and street, the city block, the plot, and specialized and ordinary building types. The book has three objectives, all of which are successfully met. First, it is a pedagogical reference with case studies and examples explaining the concept, formation and transformation of various urban components. Secondly, it delivers its arguments with clarity through a combination of texts, drawings and photographs. Thirdly, the graphic design serves admirably the previous two goals, with clever use of a highlight colour with black and white print in an elegant, affordable and practical format. However, a larger format would have been ideal, to maximize appreciation of the fine drawings.

This is a delightful book: the type of apparently modest work that tells readers so much about what they were perhaps suspecting. It reveals the remarkable Portuguese urban landscape, rich in composition, diverse in its components, yet consistent in providing a general sense of order and hierarchy combined with great attention to details and materials. Os elementos urbanos provides keys to understanding the subtle shift from the morphological design principle to the material nature of urban space and the architectural project.

The different essays draw upon larger studies, all of which are referenced in notes at the ends of chapters. Each author makes clear the international literature, both theoretical and historical, that situates the Portuguese urban heritage in a larger Western context. The examples discussed demonstrate the singular design process over time. One recurrent graphic clue developed from one essay to another is the comparison of the morphological findings of the Portuguese case studies with the ideal, or conceptual model to which the existing urban form relates. Such a device underlines the necessary interpretation that comes with the implementation and completion of a project – a fundamental observation for academics, professionals and the general public.

The first two chapters illustrate the impact of topography on the planning and design of the urban fabric, indirectly underlining the recurrence of hilly sites. Chapter 3 presents the urban design pattern of the medieval new town: the urban fabric and plot characteristics evoke the urban code implemented in the wave of New Urbanism.

Chapter 4 delves into the city squares to explore the evolution of a traditional urban form in the past two centuries. It offers examples, at the urban scale, of a more ‘regular’ shape, and the evolving urban design of the open space. Both the third and fourth chapters make a point of the importance of the built heritage and its contribution to the experience of the city. The chapter on the street introduces an interesting argument concerning street designation, topography and street design. North American cities commonly use streets, avenues and boulevards as abstract labels referring to an alleged hierarchy rarely experienced on site. The Portuguese language on the other hand offers an extended lexicon for naming specific conditions relating to the site and the intended experience, suggesting an elaborate culture of space, city and geography.

The last four chapters make the transition from the urban to the architectural scale. The large urban block (o quarteirão), typical of modern city planning, presents a set of large housing projects built after 1945. These are cases for the modernization of urban form and lifestyle, regardless of the political rhetoric of the then regime. The chapter
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on the plot (a parcela) presents two cases of national road development under the contemporary pressure of urban sprawl. Chapter 8 considers a number of ambitious projects, some completed and others only partially so, that present cases for the transition from design principle to built form. The final chapter explores tenements in Lisbon. It is arguably a little short considering the extensive prevalence of tenements following the 1755 earthquake. It presents three main types and their relationship to the urban block and the street. The detailed interior floor plans, and the underlined components highlight both recurring and changing features in residential design.

This book is an outcome of a much larger research project on the urban morphology of the Portuguese city. It compliments an exceptional book on the urban square A praça em Portugal: inventário de espaço público by the same author, published in 2007. Three other books still to come are on the evolution of urban form (O tempo e a forma), the city’s representation and assessment from different viewpoints (Outros abordagens), and concepts and methodologies for morphological research implemented in Portugal (Conceitos e metodologias).

Os elementos urbanos is a useful reference even if one’s ability to read or decipher the Portuguese language is minimal. It provides a model for morphological analysis, from an understanding of the wide range of influences and models inspiring urban and architectural concepts to the implementation of projects under local conditions in which space, time and culture are critical.

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Chinese cities have undergone rapid growth and change in the last 30 years. The unprecedented urban transformation has been underpinned by rural-urban migration, economic globalization, changes in the urban administrative systems, urban spatial reorganization through land-use change, and suburbanization associated with new housing development. The increasing tensions between equality and efficiency, power and democracy, and economic development and urban ecology and social welfare, are particularly evident in contemporary Chinese cities. Not surprisingly, the new challenges for the understanding and management of urban development have stimulated the rapid growth of research on Chinese cities both in China itself and in other parts of the world.

Published books that focus on the Chinese city are related to a wide range of academic interests and topics. They include urban political economy (Logon, 2002; Zhu, 1999; Wu et al., 2013), land-use reforms and housing commercialization (Ding and Song, 2005; Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010), urban planning principles and practice (Sit, 1995) and the historical development of Chinese cities (Xu, 2000). However, widely-inclusive and up-to-date publications that can be used as textbooks for courses on urban China have been particularly rare. Weiping Wu and Piper Gaubatz’s book, The Chinese city aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic study that can serve as a basic textbook for teaching urban China in programmes of geography, planning and environmental studies. This book not only makes a timely contribution to the provision of teaching materials, but also offers critical perspectives on the urbanization process in China against a backdrop of urban theories developed elsewhere in the world.

The book is divided into four parts including a total of thirteen chapters. Part 1 describes China’s geographical environment, historical urban system and traditional urban forms. Part 2 focuses on the urban system since 1949, the rural-urban divide and migration, and interactions with the global economy. Part 3 outlines the specific sectors of urban development, including economic restructuring, social-spatial transformation, urban infrastructure, and urban land and housing. Part 4 showcases urbanism through the lens of the urban environment, lifestyle and social change, and urban governance. Central to the book is the examination in a historico-geographical context of how current social and economic development is transforming the fundamental nature and structure of Chinese cities. Arguably this is the most comprehensive and integrated coverage so far in the English language of modern changes to Chinese cities and their relationship to earlier urban development.

A number of chapters are of particular interest to urban morphologists in that they are more concerned with the physical aspect of cities, and the linkages between culture, ideology and economy
and the built form of the city. In particular, chapters 3, 8 and 12 deserve a more detailed review. Chapter 3 investigates traditional urban forms in China. Relying on field-based research, it especially investigates the foundation, development and distinctive forms of traditional Chinese cities. Chapter 8 mainly describes changes to Chinese urban form in the second half of the twentieth century. Centred on the theme of social-spatial transformation, it outlines the alteration of urban neighbourhoods, employment-housing linkage, travel modes and urban spatial configuration. The fundamental premise is that new Chinese urban development has followed a strategy of increased spatial and functional specialization shaped both by continuing socialist and Chinese cultural ideals and by dynamically emerging domestic and international market forces. Chapter 12 is concerned with how urban spatial development has influenced lifestyle and social change. Changes to shopping, use of public spaces, aging society and urban crime are explored in this chapter.

What distinguishes this book is that it is inclusive and approachable. Illustrated by both historical and contemporary examples drawn from previous research, it focuses on fundamental themes in urban geography and planning and the evolutionary process of urban activities. While it deals with a wide variety of academic interests, it is particularly concerned with understanding the new dynamics of urban transformation in relation to the continuity and persistence of the socio-cultural traditions of Chinese cities. A successful attempt has been made to link micro and macro approaches to spatial characteristics of the city, political-economic analyses and urban development, and static models and dynamic analytical processes. The cross-regional and interdisciplinary links inherent in the book will stimulate recognition of its wide geographical relevance, and its significance across disciplines.

In conjunction with suggested further readings, this book seeks to be intelligible and relevant to a wide audience: scholars and professionals who are interested in China, and students seeking a wide understanding of Chinese cities in the context of rapid change. The objective and accurate writing style has made complex ideas readily understandable. Frequent cross-references have been made throughout the book. Clearly presented tables, graphs, photographs and maps have helped to make concepts clear.

The authors are prominent scholars in research on Chinese cities. Many of their research publications are significant and have been frequently cited. This new book, which contains a wealth of up-to-date statistical information and case studies, demonstrates effectively their research achievements and experience. In particular, the introduction and conclusion of the book provide deep insights into the era of market reform and globalization, inherent strengths and weaknesses of urban transformation, and new processes of human-environment interaction in China. The authors have paid particular attention to the complexity of Chinese urban development which in some ways conforms to established conventional urban theories and experience and in others defies them.

The outcomes and forms of urbanization and modernization in China following the reforms and opening up of communication in the late 1970s have attracted extensive attention and competing interpretations. However, a textbook on Chinese cities, which is well grounded in established and authoritative research, has hitherto been absent. Wu and Gaubatz have rectified this. Research on Chinese cities, as an emerging subject, needs interdisciplinary co-operation and international comparative study to reach a more integrated framework for analysis. In conjunction with the findings of studies of cities in other parts of the world, this book is bringing great opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons and the cross-fertilization of research ideas.

References


Shapers of Urban Form was released just in time to be presented at the Twenty-First International Seminar on Urban Form held in Porto, Portugal in July 2014 as a surprise gift to Jeremy Whitehand, to whom the book is dedicated. In his foreword, Ivor Samuels retraces the contribution of Whitehand, an indefatigable researcher on the role of agency in morphological change, and a key observer as well as a major proponent of the field of urban morphology in his capacity as editor of this journal. Samuels points to two recurring themes in recent editorials signed by Whitehand. The first theme stresses the importance of intensifying research on the ‘physiognomy of cities’ as ‘major embodiments of culture’. The second highlights the need for tighter links between research and practice, while emphasizing the necessity to understand how forms have arisen in order to decide how to better engage with the material city. Samuels states that this book is a major contribution to both these themes. It is easy to agree with him in particular as far as the first theme is concerned.

The editors solicited seventeen contributors from a variety of disciplinary and geographical horizons to reflect upon the ‘making of the urban landscape,’ by ‘tracing the stories of development, identifying the agents and the agencies involved, and how they influence the outcomes in the urban landscape’. The book is divided into six parts, including an introduction by the editors that retraces the origins of studies on urban form and on the ‘agents of morphological change’ in particular, and a conclusion in the form of a theoretical exploration by Karl Kropf. The core sections present empirical research grouped by historical periods from the Middle Ages to our times. They are entitled: Agency in Pre-Modern Settings; Agency in Early Modern Settings; Agency in Industrial-Era Settings; and Agency in Late Modern and Postmodern Settings.

As emphasized by the editors, ‘centuries of development have radically changed the cast of characters involved in the physical shaping of cities’. Yet, beyond the spectrum of historical circumstances and geographical contexts, the work offers a mosaic of approaches and themes, ranging from deeply empirically grounded interpretations to theoretical explorations, and from broad perspectives informed by political economy or sociology to approaches more focused on material transformations per se.

Karl Kropf finds in a case study of the expansion of the town of Leighton Buzzard, UK the pretext for a theoretical exploration of the mechanisms of collective learning that stem from the reciprocal interactions between various groups of agents (Chapter 17). Michaël Darin examines the underlying assumptions that led to conflicting interpretations of the nature and importance of Haussmann’s input on Paris, before introducing a three-pronged methodological approach to better situate the contribution of singular agents in relation to the evolution of cities (Chapter 6).

The importance of the realities of political economy and of their associated models of governance for the evolution of urban form are examined in different contexts. Terry R. Slater’s study of ecclesiastical precincts in European medieval towns illustrates for instance how the Church was counting on economic return generated by its urban development initiatives (Chapter 3). Anngret Simms explores the emergence of urban corporate governance in late-medieval Europe as a counter-weight to the power of feudal lords (Chapter 4). The impacts on urban form of a change of colonial regime from Russian to American in a small Alaskan town are examined by M. P. Conzen (Chapter 7), whereas Marek Koter and Mariusz Kulesza look at the role played by industrialists in the provision of housing and urban amenities in remote towns of Poland (Chapter 9). Michael Pacione considers how social and residential differentiations are intertwined in the initial development and later evolution of a garden suburb of Glasgow, UK (Chapter 10).

The ways in which actors interact within networks elicit rich empirical and theoretical discussions. Keith D. Lilley’s work highlights the complexities of the decision making process pertaining to the creation of new towns in medieval England and Wales under the rule of Edward I (Chapter 2). Katharine Arntz Thomas examines court towns and finds similarly a ‘complex network of decision making and negotiation involving a large number of actors’ at play in the production of these authoritarian urban landscapes (Chapter 5).
By studying initiatives taken by Birmingham, UK in an attempt by the city to reinvent itself physically and symbolically in the 1980s and 1990s, Tim Hall and Phil Hubbard try to understand the ‘morphology’ of a city network, ‘as complex and contradictory as the landscapes it creates’ (Chapter 16). They stress the need for developing a suitable actor network theory.

Local responses to technical requirements pertaining to the construction of railroad infrastructure are examined in Arthur J. Krim’s study of Baltimore and Philadelphia in the USA, and Manchester and Liverpool in the UK (Chapter 8). Richard Harris documents the reality of the owner-builders of Peoria, Illinois in the mid-twentieth century, to conclude that land market as well as technical considerations, such as access to standardized house plans and materials, have gradually made self-built residential developments indistinguishable from comparable speculative developments (Chapter 11). Peter J. Larkham retraces the production of some 200 reconstruction plans at the apex of ‘technocentric’ planning in Britain after the Second World War, to show how technocratic rationality confronts local agency and dynamics (Chapter 13). John R. Gold is interested in the design of megastructures – the technical systems that worked as shared and extensible frameworks – as exemplified by the city centre of the new town of Cumbernauld, UK (Chapter 14).

In a study that relies both on classical town-plan analysis and the examination of the actions of local agents in two New Zealand port cities, Kai Gu shows how different social contexts and dynamics led to different spatial and physical outcomes (Chapter 15). Finally, in an attempt to study the impact of urban morphological theories and methods on the work of ‘shapers of urban form’, Nicola Marzot considers how morphological and typological ‘readings’ have influenced the work of architects such as Muratori, Rossi and Aymonino (Chapter 12).

What all the contributions to Shapers of urban form share, in spite of their diversity, is a common epistemological approach to the study of urban form. First, each piece seeks to produce new knowledge, though relying more or less intensively on empirical work. Secondly, while focusing on agency as well as on an array of social, technical and political-economic circumstances under which groups of agents have operated, the contributions all trace the portrait of external conditions that inform the morphogenesis of different places and times. In brief, they share a cognitive and externalist approach (Gauthier and Gilliland, 2006). As such, they do not focus on the system of the built landscape per se, nor do they provide minute accounts of material transformations. Some readers, core morphologists, might still have appreciated more abundant illustrations of the built environments analysed. Yet by its scope and the quality of the research presented, this book is generous in a number of other ways. It is certainly a significant contribution to the understanding of cities in evolution.

Reference


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Tonkiss brings together for a scholarly audience a range of urban theories on the too often oversimplified physical, spatial, economic, cultural, political and social aspects of contemporary urbanization. She discusses seminal works and a range of more recent texts in a skillful historiography of contemporary urban thought, from Lynch to Jacobs, Beauregard to Koolhaas, Lefebvre to Latour, Appleyard to Mumford and more in a parade of views on city design. She repeatedly underlines the gaps between these theorists’ points of view and makes connections between the multiple challenges of urban morphology more broadly. The book’s primary contribution is to underscore and explore frameworks that have shaped an understanding of cities as social compositions.

Readers are challenged to consider urbanization through several disciplinary lenses, and a range of actors. It is evident from the first page that the contemporary city is not simply comprised of
Iconic architectures and other top-down developments, but also formal and informal practices that shape urban environments, produce and address urban problems, organize people as well as ordering space (p. 1). The ‘expertise’ of various fields is problematized by highlighting how their contributions to place making are sequenced. The core themes in urban design – connectivity, permeability, accessibility, and integration – are regarded as being as much ‘social concerns as they are spatial conditions’ (p. 3).

Design is defined as a force that communicates ‘social practices and processes that shape spatial forms, relationships and outcomes in intentional as well as in less intended ways’ (p. 5). A range of underlying or sometimes invisible forces are highlighted that provide the tectonic space upon which the physical infrastructure of the city is built, occupied and adapted over time. Defining design is difficult because of the contrasts between the predominant disciplines that claim to ‘design’ cities. Tonkiss argues that this difficulty arises from disciplinary tendencies that too often disregard the power dynamics at play in the very communities and physical environments to which an attempt is being made to give shape.

The lens of ordinary urbanism is therefore used frequently in the book to counter globalizing urban theories, many of which tend to homogenize cities and the forces that have shaped them. Three important points arise from this: first the critique of prevailing conventions within urban theory; secondly, a concern with the distinctiveness of different cities; and thirdly, an emphasis on the range of actors engaged in the process of city making. Tonkiss extends the ‘informal’ to touch on all hues of the economic spectrum, arguing that when wealthy populations are concerned, informality is a very distinct but critical factor in the shaping of contemporary urban relationships and physical outcomes. She switches the discussion of ‘informality’ to urban processes as a whole, and goes beyond the more familiar and sometimes overstated bottom-up points of view. When she says ‘the infrastructures of everyday life are composed out of embodied labour, mundane materials and quotidian connections’ (p. 24) she is expanding these phenomena into the realm of somehow measurable and comprehensible networks. The reader is being persuaded to recognize the ubiquitous rickshaw or the human sign as profoundly similar to the less immediately visible elite business tycoon’s extra-legal appropriations. And as those two unique but arguably intersectional characters – the deregulated wealthy and the ‘informal’ poor – are compared, Tonkiss is suggesting the critical need to recognize that both those who seek to understand the city and agencies that try to act on it or influence it need to think about the human clay as well as about the concrete (p. 25).

In the first six chapters, Tonkiss chronicles and elaborates a series of diverse ways that social actors influence and ultimately shape contemporary urban compositions. She repeatedly underlines, from a range of perspectives and with meaningful spatial designs, difficulties related to the advancement of societal objectives. The good intentions of designers are called into question, as seemingly blindly ambitious and even quixotic, and often unable to generate real support for peoples’ lives, and livelihoods. The multiple concerns of segregation, homogenization and at times disconnection, among other urban issues in crisis, are highlighted. However, in the seventh chapter there is a switch from the past to consider ‘The possible city’.

The book’s conclusion illuminates a powerful and yet understated force that is making micro-utopias possible all over the world, not in the mere occupation of ideal places somewhere in space, but rather in the act of self-making and in the re-making of existing underutilized and latent sites for new uses. That act of recalibrating placelessness, or what Kevin Lynch calls the ‘non-place’ as a means of offering people different possibilities for new spaces and alternative ways of adding or even measuring value, is less about a projective or speculative attitude than it is about an ownership of tangible possibilities, grounded in present conditions.

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The process of rapid growth and transformation of Chinese cities in the past 30 years is creating great challenges for understanding and managing their urban landscapes. At the same time, a wide range
of theories originating from the West are being employed by researchers in the study of Chinese cities. Among these, geographical urban morphology, associated with M. R. G. Conzen, and process typology, associated with S. Muratori and G. Caniggia are attracting increasing academic interest. The two approaches, which were mainly developed after the 1950s, are concerned with methods and techniques for analysing the spatial structure of urban form. The geographical-morphological approach (Wu, 1990) and typological thinking (Shen, 1988) were first introduced in the Chinese language in the late 1980s. The Chinese translation of M. R. G. Conzen’s classic work, Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis, was published in 2011. A systematic review of Muratori and Caniggia’s ideas and their publications on the use of their morphological and typological methods in planning were lacking in China until now.

Centred on the theme of ‘Urban morphology and urban transformation’, the first conference organized by the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF) in Asia took place in Guangzhou in 2009. This book is an outcome of this successful conference, which attracted about 220 scholars and practitioners from 26 countries. Based on a systematic introduction to Conzenian and Caniggian approaches, the main purpose of the book is to explore their application in cities in transition, especially in China. Following the introductory chapter, two chapters examine fundamental ideas about morphological thinking. Chapter 2 focuses on Conzenian ideas, which are deeply influenced by the German morphogenetic tradition (pp. 11-13). In Britain new research carried out by Conzen’s followers has mainly been concerned with urban morphological change at the micro-scale, the cross-cultural application of morphological theory and the connection between morphological research and planning. The idea of urban fringe belts is one of the most complex and frequently studied morphological concepts. In Chapter 3, a framework for its cross-cultural comparative study is presented, based on a systematic study of formation and transformation processes, the agents of change involved, and the physical characteristics of urban fringe belts.

Muratori and Caniggia’s ideas are not always easy to comprehend. This is attributable in major part to delays in the adequate translation of relevant publications into English. Aiming to deal with that problem, Chapters 5 and 6, authored by Cataldi and others outline the origin and development of the theory. The authors provide an introduction to Muratori and Caniggia’s cultural and educational backgrounds and their philosophical influences, before discussing the intellectual connection between Muratori and Caniggia and the evolution of the typological thinking in their work.

A second part of the book focuses on the application of morphological and typological approaches in the understanding and planning of built forms. It comprises Chapters 4, 7 and 8. Chapter 4, a case study of an inner city area in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, shows how to apply Conzenian ideas, especially morphological periods and fringe belts, to comprehend the transformation of the urban landscape. In Chapter 7, Whitehand and Gu develop the argument, based on a thorough literature review, that the study of the urban form of Chinese cities has rarely been the subject of micro-scale analysis, particularly at the scale of the plot. The lack of integrated methods of ‘reading’ the evolution of traditional urban form is a major problem. In exploring alternative approaches, Conzenian and Caniggian ones merit research attention (pp. 135-7). In this light, Chapters 8 and 9 investigate Guangzhou and Suzhou. Guangzhou has a long history of trading with the outside world and successive residential building types can be found in its historical core. The investigation carried out by Gu and others shows a residential typological process that is inherently continuous before the 1950s. The persistent plan and design features are envisaged as providing a basis for form-based and regional-specific development control. Chapter 9 focuses on the spatial analysis of the walled city area of Suzhou. Chen and Romice investigate the typo-morphological aspects of the traditional urban form of Suzhou and their implications for urban design.

Research on urban morphology and design typology seeks to advance knowledge of urban landscapes through the study of their changing processes and the agents and ideas involved in their creation and transformation. This book mainly introduces the origin and development of the intellectual histories and methods of geographical urban morphology and design typology. It focuses in particular on their application in planning and design practice in China, a country facing great pressures for change. The book is the first publication in China that presents a cross-cultural assessment of geographical urban morphology and architectural typology. It echoes a morphological comparison between Como, Italy and Pingyao, China (Conzen et al., 2012) that has been recently completed through international research collaboration.
Despite recent advances in morphological and typological research on Chinese cities, they have faced a variety of challenges, among which those relating to sources of information have been especially pronounced. The use of cartographical sources, especially large-scale urban maps and plans, is fundamental to understanding urban landscapes. But most traditional Chinese maps and plans are generally limited to the depiction of street systems and key landmarks. True ground plans showing streets, plots and building block-plans are rare in China until the second half of the twentieth century and limitations on their accessibility limit the selection of study areas (Gu and Zhang, 2014).

Although this edited book has clearly set out the successful application of morphological and typological concepts and methods to the urban landscape and its management in China, it is unfortunate that the seminal work on Pingyao (Whitehand and Gu, 2007) and a comparative study of Como and Pingyao (Conzen et al., 2012) have not been included. Nevertheless, the contents of the book have been selected carefully and organized appropriately. There is no doubt that this first systematic publication on Conzenian and Caniggian approaches and their utilization in China will stimulate further morphological and typological research, and contribute to the growth of international expertise in urban landscape research.

References


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Meeting of the Council of ISUF

The next meeting of the Council of ISUF will take place during the Conference of ISUF to be held in Rome, Italy, 22 to 26 September 2015. Any matters that members of ISUF wish to bring to the attention of the Secretary-General of ISUF, Dr Kai Gu, should be communicated to him at the School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: k.gu@auckland.ac.nz) by 1 August 2015.

Elections to the Council of ISUF

In accordance with the Constitution of ISUF, elections to the Council will take place at the Conference of ISUF in Rome, Italy, 22 to 26 September 2015. There will be three vacancies to fill. Nominations should be forwarded to Dr Kai Gu, Secretary-General, ISUF, School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: k.gu@auckland.ac.nz) by 1 July 2015.