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# Why (Built) Form Matters: Notes Toward a Political Theory of Urban Morphology

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## 1. Introduction

From its earliest documented manifestations [1–3], urban morphology demonstrates, through coherent and well-substantiated arguments, the essentially political meaning of built form: namely, its being a completed expression (however disputable, revocable, and potentially revisable) of a system of constraints and limits governing both behavior, *civitas*, and operation in space, *urbs*, whether natural or artificial. The *type* is, within this system, the logical evidence that can be extracted from evaluating its concrete manifestations (*a posteriori*), as well as imposed upon them as an operative constraint (*a priori*). It should therefore not be surprising that morphological discourse becomes increasingly urgent and inescapable from the moment the pre-industrial urban form begins to dissolve—an outcome pursued under the pressure of emerging entrepreneurial forces that, in this way, claim a guiding role in the processes of productive territorial transformation [4].

If this is true, it follows that not only the way that space is produced, but also the very perspective through which we interpret and value its outcomes, inevitably assumes a distinctly political significance. We find an indirect confirmation of this in the multiplicity of orientations that progressively come to characterize, methodologically, the consolidation of studies on urban form.

## 2. An Anthropology of Form

In this sense, this Special Issue of the journal *Land* has sought to testify to the existence of a broad spectrum of approaches to the study and design of form—approaches that are firmly rooted in the present—intended as responses to contemporary challenges and equally traceable to distinct schools of thought, thereby confirming the necessary *tendentiousness* implicit in any research endeavor and its operational implications. Not only is there no “natural” way of relating to nature, but the consequences of specific existential relations can be overturned with respect to their cultural premises. If the first point confirms the programmatic difference between human life and animal life—since the latter, unlike the former, reacts to stimuli through automatic responses (instincts)—the second accounts for the human capacity to continuously place any inherited, consolidated order back into play, reshaping it according to newly arisen priorities. Politics, therefore, concerns not only the transformation of given conditions promoted by the project as such [5], but also the intentionally pursued crisis of those conditions [6].

These premises, though articulated in anthropological terms, are clearly developed in the contributions by Jörg H. Gleiter (Contribution 1) and Marco Trisciuglio (Contribution 2). Read in an integrated manner, the two perspectives prove not merely complementary, but even more capable of establishing a domain of validity and internal



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coherence for built form, in its multiple meanings, as well as for its plural interpretations, within which the various proposals can be circumscribed and ordered.

The first author, unsurprisingly, draws on certain assumptions of so-called “philosophical anthropology” to argue that sustainable dwelling is not a novelty, but a “structural” condition of the living being, programmatically unable to relate fully to the environment into which it is “thrown” at birth, thus justifying its incessant “prehension”, to paraphrase Whitehead, toward the development of a process of relative “adaptation” [7]. This process, it should be recalled, does not respond to instincts, i.e., predetermined principles and/or criteria of innate rationality. Rather, proceeding through trial and error in an iterative and dialogical mode, adaptation establishes the relational conditions through which both the living being and the environment progressively acquire unequivocally cultural connotations; in this view, so-called rationality constitutes a kind of first derivative, producing both human beings and their artificial landscape. If, therefore, the process of reciprocal adaptation is the cause of form, beyond the bodily “givenness” of boundary conditions, form itself, as a relative effect, immediately becomes a factor of reciprocal conditioning among the parties involved.

Trisciuglio’s position provides the complementary antipode of this theoretical posture. Precisely because adaptation does not constitute a predetermined response to assigned conditions, but proceeds tentatively, its premises may be overturned, overcoming the programmatic inertia to change that is embedded in built form itself, through a different use of its outcomes. By reworking in an original way the concept of “exaptation” proposed by Stephen J. Gould [8] within the natural sciences, and translating it into the social sciences, the Turin-based scholar finds precise confirmations of the reuse of given forms for different purposes than those originally assigned to them, within processes of transformation of major buildings from antiquity. This occurs through a process of “co-optation” that requires a pragmatically oriented development over time.

If, therefore, Gleiter locates the premises of the political meaning of built form in the “sovereign decision” and the degrees of sharing that regulate possible adaptation to given environmental conditions, Trisciuglio extends them to the deliberation that leads to the prior deactivation, and subsequent transition, of inherited constraints toward a new possible order. If “adaptation” and “exaptation” are thus processes whose development is unpredictable and pragmatically oriented, their outcomes crystallize into forms that, however temporarily, establish a constraint that is capable of guaranteeing a yield both for the corresponding action and for the causal nexus between means and ends.

The inherited traits that would transmit, from generation to generation, the formally acquired patrimony thus confirm, by strict analogy, an embodied knowledge [9] of which bodies may perform and, if needed, disregard, withdrawing from it for reasons of opportunity. The use of bodies, paraphrasing a well-known essay by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben [10], thereby assumes a foundational relevance both for acting and operating, both of which require a prior formalization and logical–rational crystallization, and for the corresponding deposition of such formalization, aimed at the search for new horizons of meaning beyond those conventionally accepted.

If the “built thing” fully expresses the specific form of “dwelling on the earth” in its concrete phenomenal manifestation, as *μορφή* (*morphé*), the type returns the knowledge that has been embodied over the course of the relation, a knowledge that can be distinguished from form and thereby made explicit and intelligible, only through an act of thought, made visible as *εἶδος* (*eidos*) [11]. To grasp the nature of this separation fully, it is important to recall that the type is disclosed through the “imprint” of the work performed by the living being on the environment in order to render it habitable and hospitable, overturning its

original premises. The transformed environment, retroactively, as we have already noted, reflects back upon the living being itself, shaping it.

This is confirmed by etymology. “To work” derives from the Ancient Greek *λαμβάνω* (*lambánō*), literally “to take,” “to grasp,” and figuratively “to understand,” from which *λήψις* (*lēpsis*), “grasp,” “seizure”, is derived. The corresponding Latin lemma *labor*, implying “toil,” confirms the profound existential implications of a doing that entails suffering in the absence of adequate tools. The separation described above thus occurs between work and its “leaving a trace”—between “doing,” heuristic and experimental, and the corresponding “knowing how to do,” rational and theoretical—where the former always precedes the latter.

### 3. The Being and Becoming of Form

These arguments also, significantly and not by chance, help elucidate certain aporias of the theory of “documentality” [12]. We refer in particular to the theoretical void left by the “new realists” regarding the fragile passage from “facticity” to “thinkability,” which seems to re-propose a concealed primacy of the “intelligible” over the “sensible,” thus mortgaging the full unfolding of morpho-typological culture.

It should therefore not surprise us that the totality of contributions aimed at appreciating the type as an effective and shared design instrument, i.e., as a means of stabilizing a socially constructed reality, oscillate within this essential polarity: between the uncertain work of transforming given conditions and the conceptual reflection of that work in the new conditions that are obtained. Once the primacy of politics is recognized, already defined by Plato as *βασιλική τέχνη* (*basiliké téchne*), since it alone can explain the *why* of things, and once its first object is established in form itself for the reasons set out above, the reflection hosted in this Special Issue of *Land* shifts to *how* that same form is literally and conceptually defined.

Paolo Carlotti (Contribution 3), developing the notion of “architectural acupuncture,” renews the analogy between the archeologist’s work and the architect’s. Both operate upon the complex historical sedimentation of the built city, with the aim of progressively separating its multiple layers, tracing their internal presuppositions of coherence in order to attribute to them a complete sense. The designer’s specific contribution, however, consists of not stopping at analysis, which as such “loosens” existing links among what it programmatically separates. In fact, he is fully aware that the causes generating the structural coherence of each architectural-building “text” must be sought, by difference, within its own premises: that is, within the incessant process of transformation made manifest by the urban “palimpsest”, which stands critically “between” successive phases of organic completeness.

Giulia Annalinda Neglia (Contribution 4) pursues a similar objective, starting from the territorial dimension and investigating the tight relation between its internal measure and urban form. In this perspective, interstitial space becomes the index of a process of landscape transformation that the city, in its incessant growth, consumes and assimilates to its reasons, operating “from without”, placing itself programmatically between the *pars destruens* of obsolete ties and the *pars construens* of hoped-for values. What appears superficially as a meaningless “void” thus assumes the characteristics of a “relic”, whose fragmentation registers the advance of a metabolic process that is capable of opening new possibilities and horizons of meaning. It follows, therefore, that the project can be identified with the synthesis between what “is no longer” and what “is not yet” [13].

The contribution by Renato Capozzi and Federica Visconti (Contribution 5) seems to stage, within an ideal “anatomical theatre”, the dialectical mechanism through which the city exceeds its limits in search of unprecedented configurations freed from the constraints

of time. Their careful reconstruction of the history of studies on urban form in Italy, with particular attention to the relation between urban morphology and building typology, leads them to identify in the primacy of form a common ground of understanding, even while acknowledging the ineliminable differences in orientation among the individual positions invoked. Referring to the teaching of Uwe Schröder, they counterpose to the former the role of “space,” understood as the system of logical–rational relations that every accomplished form implies. Their subsequent distinction between “closed spaces,” denoting internality and relative structural coherence, and “open spaces,” evoking externality and the multiplication of possible degrees of freedom, places the traditional and modern city side by side, making them mutually comparable and allowing them to coexist within the dimension of the *Großstadt*. Beyond its explicit design aim, the proposal seeks to render visible to the “eyes of the mind” the work of “resolving” the structural links of the city that remain implicit in its final form during the process of urban transformation. Through a paratactic procedure, distinct phases are displayed alongside one another, making the mechanism intelligible.

Domenico Giuseppe Chizzoniti and Tommaso Lolli (Contribution 6) return to the centrality of the architect’s work, taking as their testing ground the reconstruction of urban areas that have been partially destroyed and traumatized by armed conflicts. The tools they propose are “rewriting” and “assembling.” The former pertains to the specific mode and stance through which the territory has developed, i.e., the anthropization of given environmental conditions, which are held responsible for the mutual identity implications between economy and culture, society and politics. Referring to the Latin tradition of *genius* and the Ancient Greek *δαίμων* (*daimon*), rewriting thus expresses the capacity to operate by pursuing a “doing” that is heuristically oriented toward discovering its own “knowing how to do,” necessarily actualized in its goals.

Assembling, in a complementary perspective, expresses the capacity, beyond any nostalgic approach, to recombine material fragments of meaning (i.e., lacunae of urban form, often of high symbolic value) and immaterial ones (i.e., structuring and locally recognizable typological expressions), onto which to graft the creatively disorienting contribution of imagination that opens toward new possibles, establishing unprecedented relations among what is known. This objective is pursued by working on the “gaps,” both material and semantic, disclosed by partial “erasures” of urban fabrics following traumatic events.

Karsten Ley’s reflection (Contribution 7) can be taken as an effective synthesis of the proposed design contributions, implicitly containing their premises. Urban history is here understood as an interdisciplinary domain that programmatically exceeds the limits of any excessively “scientific” approach. Such an approach, proceeding through successive separations, cannot grasp relational nexuses that are never reducible to the internal coherence of “structure”, proper to every classification and to any defined disciplinary domain. Pragmatism and history thus appear deeply interrelated, and the conjunctural dimension plays an essential role in understanding urban form and its spaces.

#### 4. Interpreting Form

We have already recalled in the premise that the political value of urban form is not found solely in the construction, abandonment, and transformation of the city and its corresponding “facts”, but also inheres deeply in their appreciation and interpretation. If every method of morphological inquiry claims the capacity to interrogate built form, revealing unprecedented aspects, then every urban representation conveys tendentious meanings that are not necessarily contained in its object all the more, up to deliberately overturning its sense by intentionally short-circuiting it.

We can therefore affirm not only that through the project we understand the emergence of an instituting “grasp” that establishes socially constructed reality through the manifestation of form, of which the project is the revealing instrument of the “how”, but also that architectural and urban representation share the same ambition. Contemporary representation, however, has reached such a level of technological complexity and sophistication that it can itself become an instrument of design.

Although this thesis had already been anticipated by Aldo Rossi and later developed by his followers in the economy of his early studies on urban form [14], until it became the premise of his theoretical manifesto *La città analoga* [15], this Special Issue of *Land* gives ample prominence to the effects induced by new techniques of urban analysis. Suffice it to recall the growing interest in space syntax. Kayvan Karimi (Contribution 8), in this sense, shows how integrating qualitative methods that can be attributed to morphological analysis with quantitative approaches based on dynamic mapping of flows operating in urban contexts makes it possible not only to produce an interactive map of the actual use of urban form by users, distinguishing roles and purposes and confirming the strict imbrication of space and society, but also to highlight latent criticalities and possible strategies for overcoming them. Through a circular and iterative process, representation thus becomes an instrument that is capable, through sequences of analysis, design, and evaluation of effects, of simulating transformation within a virtual environment, with subsequent concrete implications in real contexts. In this way, the “psychogeographic” approach developed by Guy Debord for eminently subversive ends in the 1950s, and condensed in the theory of the *dérive*, becomes a tool for optimizing urban accessibility in order to enhance the performance of form.

The relations between space and society, through the integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses, also underpin the contribution by Ilaria Geddes, Christakis Chatzichristou, Nadia Charalambous, and Ana Ricchiardi (Contribution 9). Their aim is to extend to morphological studies both the philosophical prerogatives of Manuel De Landa’s *Assemblage Theory* [16] and the sociological ones of Bruno Latour’s *Actor–Network Theory* [17], making certain latent implications manifest while renewing the discipline’s statutes. In both cases, disciplinary migrations prove promising. The first application mobilizes the very process of classifying entities composing an assemblage, moreover a distinctive trait of urban morphology itself. Just as every class expresses a criterion of belonging that manifests through selection and combination of objects within a group, its definition is subject to continuous renegotiations, confirming its creative and social valence. The pertinent and distinctive trait of any class does not belong to its elements any more than it is instituted by those who discretize the original *continuum*, thereby claiming responsibility. These attributes confirm once again the implicit political value of all classification and standardization [18].

The second application extends territorial relations to all objects—natural, social, ideal, and artefactual—with which we are continuously engaged, often unconsciously, thereby expanding in an unprecedented manner the concept of “agency” and its operational implications. This explains the ways in which appropriation of the living environment, natural and/or artificial, takes form through reciprocal contamination among multiple factors.

The progressive shift in interest toward quantitative evaluations that are applied to urban morphology also justifies the growing attention to the morphometric dimension of urban studies: the identification and systematization of parameters for measuring form itself. This is an increasingly relevant aspect for a possible theory of landform [19] and, above all, for the capacity of drawing to express embodied knowledge through the quality of work invested in its development. Such outcomes remain fully consistent with the

foundational premises of urban morphology, provided one recognizes in the design of the earth's surface, and in the modes of traversing it, an archetypal expression of the territory's architecture, as Carl Schmitt [20] and later Saverio Muratori [21] felicitously anticipated from complementary perspectives.

Thus, Alessandro Venerandi, Giovanni Fusco, and Matteo Caglioni (Contribution 10) ask whether the Smart City, lacking formal evidence that permits sensible appreciation and the recurrence of typological characters from being extractable from it, can at least be measured through the selection of appropriate quality indicators. Similarly, Shen Yang, Qingming Zhan, Kaili Zhang, and Hurex Paryzat (Contribution 11) analyze the performance of the infrastructural network of a traditional city, comparing it with that of recent urban development, extending to the field of urban morphology the use of mathematical models that belong to Percolation Theory. Bohong Zheng, Fangzhou Tian, Li Lin, and Jinyu Fan (Contribution 12) are also attempting to apply a computational system that is capable of integrating traditional morphological analysis, space syntax, digital map reading, geographic information systems (GIS), and sDNA tools to the analysis of road networks and open spaces. The stated objective is to identify parameters that, through comparative analysis, will enable the morphological characteristics of a city's individual historical periods to be evaluated. The contribution by Huimin Ji, Yifan Li, Juan Li, and Wowo Ding (Contribution 13) fits coherently within a vector space framework as well. Through careful selection and combination, within a simulator operating in a virtual environment, of parameters that are capable of describing the perception of a real street system, it becomes possible to measure the performance of an urban space according to an assigned criterion (in this case, behavior under local wind action), turning representation into an effective design instrument. Another quantitative approach is that of Barbara Gherri's approach (Contribution 14). The possibility of mitigating the effects of solar overheating in urban areas, particularly the phenomenon of "heat islands", through a morphologically responsible and thematically circumscribed use of vegetative materials in their multiple specifications is subjected to a rigorous process of measurement, whose implications enable significant operational repercussions in both urban planning and architectural design.

## 5. Digital Environments and Form

These approaches, on closer inspection, seem to share an interest in a definition of technique that is no longer reducible to a merely instrumental function of orientation within given conditions and of corresponding knowledge. In this sense, the idea that urban representation now aspires to replace built reality, positioning itself as its alter ego through which one can simulate within a protected environment (i.e., within cyberspace) the relevant dynamics, explains Alessandro Merlo and Gaia Lavoratti's (Contribution 15) interest in the metaverse and its applications in morphological research.

Undoubtedly, the "information revolution," and in particular the georeferencing of graphic and iconographic sources, makes it extremely easy to compare two- and three-dimensional restitutions, acquiring a considerable amount of qualitatively relevant information about interpretations of urban form. However, the growing development of generative artificial intelligence allows a shift from the "descriptive" to the "predictive" dimension, simulating possible worlds that represent alternatives to existing ones by acting upon the imaginative capacities of new synthetic neural networks. If the implicit limit of this approach lies in the need for continuous interrogation of web-based content, assumed as an analogical term of environmental conditions against which representation pursues its logic of progressive "adaptation", the subsequent overcoming of that limit seems to consist in the pervasive integration of remote sensing with real contexts. This is the perspective

adopted by Andreas Braun, Gebhard Warth, Felix Bachofer, Michael Schultz, and Volker Hochschild (Contribution 16). Here, however, the problem of selecting and combining the data subject to evaluation and representation is brought back to mapping techniques and their units of measure, which do not necessarily coincide with the systems of subdivision and internal articulation that is proper to urban morphology in its specific authorial declensions. The task, therefore, is to establish adequate criteria of alignment, so as not to induce, prejudicially, falsifications and deformations of the initial datum, i.e., the input, thereby compromising understanding beyond the legitimate intention of the researcher.

## 6. The Crisis of the Political Value of Form and New Scenarios

The growing competition between territorial representation and territorial design, however, conceals unexpectedly revolutionary implications. We should not forget that the crisis of the relationship between urban morphology and building typology is not attributable to the inevitable proliferation of distinctions and interpretative currents, which is fully comprehensible in light of the political implications contained in the object itself. Responsibility lies entirely with the planning discipline and its autonomist claims, pursued tenaciously at least since the post-war period, through the substitution of the Plan for built form as *instrumentum regni*: a factor of understanding, regulating, and governing ongoing transformation [22].

The political delegitimation of urban form and of its internal measure has been accomplished through the progressive replacement of morpho-typological criteria, still clearly operative at the beginning of the twentieth century, first with “functional” criteria, and then with the introduction of “performance-based” ones, which are particularly relevant today with respect to energy comfort and structural safety. By its nature, as we have repeatedly emphasized, the type is a descriptive criterion *a posteriori* and a prescriptive one *a priori* of built reality [23], and the city is the laboratory of its heuristic elaboration. The work of constructing form, in its prototypical valence, i.e., pragmatically anticipating the knowledge embodied within it, has always served as the *trait d’union* guaranteeing the necessary correspondence between competence that is acquired through continuous experimentation and performance and obtainable by its extended application to reality.

Contemporary technical–normative performances and modern prescriptions, however, no longer bear any relation to the context of reference, having assumed an abstracting valence. Technique, in this way, has become the Plan’s accomplice in the progressive delegitimation of form, recognizing in it an undue limitation, if not a dangerous interference, in the free unfolding of its potentialities. In this way, the “how” has replaced the “why”, debasing form as the political “thing” par excellence and relegating it to the role of a mere “superstructural” extra [24].

Within this problematic framework, new forms of urban representation may aspire to replace the Plan itself, correcting it for its structural inertia toward change, which now qualifies it as a braking factor and obstacle to ongoing transformation. This result could be pursued, and achieved, by rehabilitating morpho-typological criteria that have been updated to present challenges, measuring their performances in advance within interactive environments through trial-and-error logics that are analogous to those always used in transforming the existing city “in corpore vivo”. For this reason, the pedagogy of urban form acquires an unexpectedly political significance.

In this context, Sérgio Barreiros Proença, Cristiana Valente Monteiro, and Francesca Dal Cin (Contribution 17) show how the study of urban form and its transformations, combined with quantitative data within a multidisciplinary logic, can effectively help prevent the most catastrophic effects induced by climate change, seeking and verifying the most suitable solutions in adaptive terms within a medium- to long-term perspec-

tive. Nadia Charalambous and Vítor Oliveira (Contribution 18), in particular, propose a “blended” learning method integrating field experience with desk-based reflection, alternating in-person and remote activities, collaborative phases and individual explorations, through the use of advanced techniques for analysis, sharing results, and decision-making, demonstrating awareness of the growing need to correlate real experience and virtual simulation.

This leads, ultimately, and in light of the multiplicity and variety of contributions gathered here, to imagining, as the next step, an integrated pedagogy: a reciprocal “leading by the hand” between living beings and machines, observing the behavior of one through the other, and vice versa. A hybridization of knowledges that, according to the logic of the “gap” (*scarto*) [25], enables mutual “understanding” within a relationship of unprecedented correspondence. If Günther Anders, complaining to his teacher Heidegger during American “captivity”, felt, against his will, a “shepherd of machines” rather than a “shepherd of being” [26], the present asks us to integrate the two perspectives, making them mutually collaborative.

Perhaps, ultimately, this is precisely the auspice with which this Special Issue of *Land* takes leave of its authors, unaware of these conclusions, and offers itself to the curiosity of its readers, who will be free to judge the ambitions expressed by the editors.

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