

## BOOK REVIEW:

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URBAN MORPHOLOGY:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF  
THE PHYSICAL FORM OF CITIES

Edited by Vitor Oliveira.

The Urban Book Series, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham,  
Switzerland, 2016, 192pp.

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Although urban morphology as a field of knowledge and research has evolved significantly over recent decades, which is evident in numerous scientific papers, journals and conferences held in this field, there is a lack of books that can be used as a “tool” for students and young researchers who are interested in studying basic features of urban form and urban morphology as the science of urban form.

Book *Urban Morphology: An introduction to the study of the physical form of cities*, edited by Vitor Oliveira, presents the first book in the Urban Book Series of Oliveira’s work and commitment not only in providing a systematic treatment of basic attributes of urban morphology and its general understanding, such as his work presented within this book, but also in revealing teaching methods and introducing to the work and thinking of the most prominent urban morphologists, presented in his two other books – *Teaching Urban Morphology* (Oliveira, 2018) and *J. W. R. Whitehand and the historico-geographical approach to urban morphology* (Oliveira, 2019).

Described by the editor as a manual and drawn on his personal experience and approach to teaching urban morphology, this book aims to provide brief introduction to the basic elements of physical form of our cities, agents and processes shaping that form over time, but also to introduce reader with different theoretical approaches to the to the urban morphology as a study of urban form and relationship that it has with various other disciplines, practices and fields of knowledge.

The manual is divided into two distinct parts. The first part of the book (Chapters 2-5) is focused on the main “object” – the city and urban form itself. It starts with presenting the main elements of urban form – urban tissue, streets, urban blocks, plots and buildings (Chapter 2), and the fundamental actors and processes of transformation shaping these elements (Chapter 3). Dealing with the questions who design urban form and how each idea is effectively implemented on the ground, Oliveira points to the importance of the role that each individual actor – developer, architect, builder, planning officer or politician, has in the process of creation and transformation of the urban form.

An outline of the basic physical elements of the urban form is followed by a concise chronological overview of the evolution of cities and their urban forms (Chapter 4). This chapter aims to present the similarities, and differences as well, within the main characteristics of urban form and its elements, and the principles of their composing over different periods in history due to different

civilizational influences. Exploring our collective urban history through the analysis of cities dating back to the earliest civilizations of Mesopotamia and China, up to the cities of 19th century (Chapter 4), as well as the analysis of the urban form of contemporary cities – New York, Marrakesh and Porto (Chapter 5), Oliveira emphasizes the importance of understanding the diversity of urban forms and alerts to the tendency of homogenization of urban landscapes, which was characteristic for the period of the twentieth century.

While the first part of the manual focuses on the main subject of the urban morphology – physical elements of the urban form, the second part deals with the general understanding of urban morphology, and addresses the main approaches that urban morphologists have been developed in order to understand the physical form of cities.

Urban morphology has been introduced through the “classics” in urban studies, written in the period from the late 1950s to early 1980s, by the most prominent authors in this field – Saverio Muratori, Michael Conzen, Kevin Lynch, Gordon Cullen, Jane Jacobs, Jean Castex, Jean Charles Depaule and Philippe Panerai, and Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson (Chapter 6). Those fundamental texts are followed by the analysis of four different morphological approaches, developed over the last decades – historico-geographical, process-typological, space syntax and various forms of spatial analysis. Referring to the perceived diversity and complexity of urban form and impact that it has on the variety of morphological approaches, defined in order to describe and explain it, Oliveira points to the need for developing comparative studies between these approaches and establishing potential common ground, rather than highlighting the differences between them.

Chapter *From Theory to Practice* (Chapter 7), addresses the relationship between research on urban morphology and guidelines for the production of new urban forms within the field of urban planning and architecture. Exploring urban morphology in relation to the fundamental dimensions of our collective life in cities, through the public health, social justice, heritage tourism and energy (Chapter 8), Oliveira points out to the growing importance of developing key cross-disciplinary links between urban morphology and the different bodies of knowledge studying the city, in order of creating effective integrated and applicative research.

The significance of the book *Urban Morphology: An introduction to the study of the physical form of cities* lies in the sublimated, thorough and clear overview of the basic terms, topics and approaches that urban morphology as a discipline deals with, but also in the recognition and presentation of the applicative and integral character that urban morphology as a discipline has. In doing so, this book goes beyond the informational character of the textbook, and becomes a manual that links the scientific description and explanation and professional practice and its application.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Oliveira, V. (2018). *Teaching Urban Morphology*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Oliveira, V. (Ed.). (2019). *JWR Whitehand and the historico-geographical approach to urban morphology*. Springer.