



Excellent work is being done in our country



Text: Helena Peixoto
Photo: Egidio Santos

Vítor Manuel Araújo de Oliveira, aged 44, is a Principal Researcher at the Research Centre for Territory, Transport and Environment (CITTA) at FEUP. His academic career began at the Faculty of Architecture (FAUP), where he graduated, but since completing his Masters in Spatial Planning and Urban Project, a joint FAUP/FEUP course, he has never left Engineering. He received his PhD in Civil Engineering in 2008 and in 2002 he joined CITTA, where he has dedicated himself to the subject in which he specializes - Urban Morphology.

Biographical note

Vítor Oliveira holds a degree in Architecture (FAUP) and a PhD in Civil Engineering (FEUP). He is a fully Integrated Member and Principal Researcher at CITTA (which he joined in 2002). His research areas are urban morphology, urban planning, architecture and cities. Within these research areas, he has authored about 200 publications and communications, including 32 papers in international peer-reviewed journals listed in Scopus or ISI. He has been working on different research projects supported by national and international funding, and he has been part of several scientific and organizing committees of international conferences, including the 21st International Seminar on Urban Form (Chair of the Conference). In 2016 he published 'Urban Morphology - An Introduction to the Study of the Physical Form of Cities' (Springer), a textbook on urban morphology tested in courses in ten universities in Portugal, Brazil, Spain and China. His most recent books are 'Teaching Urban Morphology' and 'JWR Whitehand and the historico-geographical Approach to Urban Morphology'.

So how does someone manage to simultaneously do research while also being an Assistant Professor at the Lusófona University of Porto (Universidade Lusófona do Porto), Secretary General of the International Seminar on Urban Form, member of the Editorial Board of the journal Urban Morphology, President of the Portuguese-language Network of Urban Morphology (Rede Lusófona de Morfologia Urbana), member of the Editorial Board of several other journals not to mention being the author of four books published in the space of one year? We went to try and find out.

CITTA

The Research Centre for Territory, Transport and Environment (CITTA) is a research unit belonging to the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto (FEUP) and the Faculty of Science and Technology of the University of Coimbra (FCTUC) dedicated to the dissemination and development of knowledge in the areas of Spatial Planning, Environmental Policy, Planning and Transport Engineering, and also operating leading laboratory spaces at both poles.

CITTA is organized into four major research groups: Environmental Planning and Evaluation; Urban Planning and Housing; Transport Planning and Analysis; and Engineering and Transport Management. It has a high reputation

for producing detailed knowledge about the functioning of cities, urban systems, transport infrastructures and services and develops innovative approaches and solutions to their problems based on this understanding.

CITTA collaborates with both key researchers and doctoral fellows. While most researchers have a degree in Civil Engineering, other educational fields are also represented including Architecture, Environmental Engineering, Geography, Landscape Architecture, Spatial Planning and Sociology.

citta.fe.up.pt

Why did you choose CITTA and 'Urban Morphology' as a study area?

Around the same time I was beginning my Masters in Spatial Planning and Urban Project in 2002, CITTA was taking its first steps. It launched a research scholarship and I successfully applied for this grant. In fact, I already had a huge passion for cities, particularly for the physical shape of cities: the streets, blocks, plots and buildings (common and special buildings). And although professor Alfredo Matos Ferreira, an outstanding professor from FAUP, was already a leading influence on me, at FEUP I met professor Paulo Pinho (responsible for CITTA) who literally taught me how to carry out research and was also the supervisor for my Masters and PhD theses. The Centre enabled me to use multidisciplinary as a kind of backdrop to analyse an object as complex as the city and FEUP gave me the institutional conditions to start developing my space in a broad context.

How would you define your main functions at the centre?

Right now I have two projects in hand. The first one is called Spatial Planning for Change (SPLACH) which is a project involving the University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL) and the University of Aveiro: based on a careful reading of the national territory, it aims to prepare a compendium of urban policies. I am coordinating one line of research dedicated to the influence of urban form on the city's metabolism. The second project, Emerging Perspectives on Urban Morphology (EPUM), involves four more European partners and seeks to combine different approaches in urban morphology (different ways of looking at the physical shape of cities) through teaching. I am coordinating FEUP's participation, and contributing my knowledge about one of these approaches, termed 'historico-geographical'.

What is your 'dream project' to develop at CITTA (or is it already taking place)?

I would love to develop a comprehensive look at the Past,

Present and possible Futures of the city, highlighting the impact of urban form on the different dimensions of our daily life in urban space. In 2018 I submitted an application to the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) focused on this project – named Morpho – and got funding. The project should start in July.

How can you publish four books in just one year?

First of all, it is very important to realize that though four books were published in the same year, preparation for each began in different years. The fact that they all came out in 2018 is a coincidence! Since 2011 I have kept up an average of one book per year.

Secondly, and moreover, each book is the result of teamwork. I design the project, coordinate the process, and author a few chapters in each of the books, but I get contributions from a group of colleagues. For example, the latest of these books, which we launched in Birmingham in mid-December, was "JWR Whitehand and the Historico-geographical Approach to Urban Morphology". The book is a reflection on the contribution of a British geographer, Jeremy Whitehand, to a specific approach in urban morphology. After doing some research, I wrote a chapter in which I identified five dimensions in which this contribution could be divided. Instead of writing the five chapters, exploring these five dimensions in detail, I invited the five people who seemed to me the best able to explore these dimensions.

Your work has received international recognition. One of your books has even been translated into Persian! How does it feel to reach out the world?

Yes, 'Urban Morphology: an Introduction to the Study of the Physical Form of Cities' has been translated into Persian and being very well received - its digital format has over 17,500 paid downloads! One of the countries that has shown most interest is Iran and one of the main reasons is the lack of books that provide such a comprehensive and introductory approach to the field of urban morphology. The book is





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a manual for an Urban Morphology course and, besides Portugal, I have given this course in Brazil, China and Spain. One of my articles has been translated into Mandarin, but this is the first time I have seen a book of mine translated into a language other than English or Portuguese. There is a lot of dedication involved in my research work and it is very gratifying to see the effort and quality of the findings recognized by different people in different continents. In addition, this international recognition allows me to work with people from different 'urban cultures' (both in projects and in the supervision of doctorates) and to deal with different objects (cities). Given the specific nature of Urban Morphology, the diversity of the sample allows me to gain an increasingly clear view of the 'city' object.

CITTA is also a centre with national and international recognition. Why is that?

I would identify three main reasons. First of all, the leadership of Professor Paulo Pinho, who during the last decade and a half, and amid the ups and downs facing the country and the centre, has always been able to make the most correct decisions, not only in terms of scientific content, but also in terms of gathering human and financial resources. Secondly, I would highlight the team of researchers who make up the Centre – together we have conducted key research in the area of Planning and Transport. In the last five years CITTA researchers have been responsible for 40% of articles published nationally dealing with these two areas and the annual number of academic publications from each centre researcher is above the European average! Finally, I would also point out the institutional importance of the two faculties that support the research centre: FEUP and the Faculty of Sciences and Technology of the University of Coimbra (FCTUC).

Is Portugal on the right track in terms of research in the area of Urban Morphology?

The creation of the Portuguese-language Network of Urban Morphology – PNUM – (Rede Lusófona de Morfologia Urbana) in 2010 revealed the truth of an assumption: excellent work is being done in our country, whether in research centers where urban morphology has a fairly central role, or in studies developed by individual

researchers. I would say that the most compelling challenges for this research work in the coming years are to seek ways of better communicating its findings, underlining the contribution that this area of knowledge can give to our lives, and to exert an ever greater influence on the planning and design of the physical shape of our cities.

You argue that Urban Morphology and the professional practice of Planning and Architecture must be inseparable. Why?

Urban morphology provides 'knowledge' to 'act' on the physical shape of cities, which is one of the purposes of Planning and Architecture. Of course, this knowledge acquires multiple expressions. Just one example is the way we use the 'ground' feature in our cities. In studying this issue, I focus on the role of one of the main elements of urban form, the plot, and the formal and social diversity we get when we divide our blocks into a large number of narrow front plots. The analysis of the 'plot' element in different cities, in different historical times, gives us the necessary knowledge to provide guidelines for the practice of Planning and Architecture. Not only do I advocate this in theory but I actually live in one of these narrow front plots, in a house with a contemporary design (designed by myself and my wife, who is also an architect), with a range of inputs from urban morphology, in which each architectural option stems from a lesson learned from the past.

Who is your inspiration in this area?

My great inspiration in Urban Morphology is the British geographer Jeremy Whitehand, with whom I am proud to maintain a close relationship, both personally and institutionally. No one else, internationally, has done so much for this field of knowledge as he has! Over the last decades he has contributed to the disciplinary definition of Urban Morphology. Within this comprehensive definition, and based on the work of another geographer – MRG Conzen, Whitehand proposed a theory of urban form defined from a 'historico-geographical' perspective. Within this theory, he opened up a series of research lines, while formulating and developing concepts and methods to describe, explain and prescribe the city's physical shape. ■

