Urban morphology and Urban design in the context of Brazilian Critical urbanism

Morfologia urbana e o Desenho urbano no contexto do Urbanismo crítico brasileiro

Morfología urbana y Diseño urbano en el contexto del urbanismo crítico brasileño

Alexandre Hepner, Master of Architecture and Urbanism, University of São Paulo, and Master of Sciences in Sustainable Environmental Design, Architectural Association School of Architecture; PhD candidate in Architecture and Urbanism, University of São Paulo. Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the Mackenzie Presbyterian University.
E-mail: alexandre.hepner@mackenzie.br iD *http://orcid.org/0009-0005-1719-1143*

Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss contemporary theoretical trends in urban morphology and urban design, identifying recent contributions from foreign authors that allow these disciplines to be brought closer together to critical urban thinking in Brazil. We begin by reviewing the origins of these two disciplines in the mid-1950s and their incursions into Brazil from the 1980s onwards, with particular attention to the discussion about the epistemic structure of urban design. We then discuss the writings of Alexander Cuthbert, who aims to articulate the emergence of a critical "New Urban Design"

oriented from political economy, defending the understanding of urban design as the social process through which the city acquires its urban form, as well as its intrinsically ideological nature. Finally, we argue about the potential convergence of this contemporary approach and critical urban thinking in Brazil.

Keywords: Urban design; Urban morphology; Critical urbanism; Political economy; Ideology.

Resumo

Este artigo busca realizar uma discussão sobre correntes teóricas contemporâneas da morfologia urbana e do desenho urbano, identificando contribuições recentes de autores estrangeiros que permitam uma aproximação destas disciplinas com o pensamento urbano crítico no Brasil. Partimos, inicialmente, de um resgate das origens destas duas disciplinas em meados da década 1950, e suas incursões no Brasil a partir dos anos 1980, particularmente com atençãoà discussão acerca da estrutura epistêmica do desenho urbano. Discute-se, em seguida, os escritos de Alexander Cuthbert, que buscam articular a emergência de um "Novo Desenho Urbano" crítico e pautado por uma aproximação com a Economia política, defendendo o entendimento do desenho urbano como o processo social através do qual a cidade adquire sua forma urbana, assim como de sua natureza intrinsecamente ideológica. Por fim, argumentamos acerca da potencial convergência desta abordagem contemporânea e do pensamento urbano crítico no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Desenho urbano; Morfologia urbana; Urbanismo crítico; Economia política; Ideologia.

Resumen

Este artículo busca emprender una discusión sobre las corrientes teóricas contemporáneas de la morfología urbana y del diseño urbano, identificando contribuciones recientes de autores extranjeros que permitan una aproximación de estas disciplinas con el pensamiento urbano crítico en Brasil. Inicialmente nos propusimos revisar los orígenes de estas dos disciplinas a mediados de la década de 1950 y sus incursiones en Brasil a partir de la década de 1980, con especial atención a la discusión sobre la estructura epistémica del diseño urbano. Se discuten luego los escritos de Alexander Cuthbert, que buscan articular el surgimiento de un "Nuevo Diseño Urbano" crítico guiado por una aproximación a la Economía Política, defendiendo la comprensión del diseño urbano como el proceso social a través del cual la ciudad adquiere su forma urbana, así como su naturaleza intrínsecamente ideológica. Finalmente, argumentamos sobre la posible convergencia de este enfoque contemporáneo y el pensamiento urbano crítico en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Diseño urbano; Morfología urbana; Urbanismo crítico; Economía política; Ideología.

Introduction

I n 1956, the first "Urban Design Conference" was held at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, an event attended by several distinguished thinkers and critics in the fields of architecture and urbanism, including highly regarded figures such as Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford. The event, chaired by Josep Lluís Sert, then serving as dean of this prestigious school, represented a sort of "turning point" in international thinking about urban planning, worn out by the experience of modern urbanism, at a time when, not coincidentally, the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) were facing their decline.[1]

This conference is generally recognized as one of the initial milestones of Urban Design, an interdisciplinary field of knowledge that intersects architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture, focusing on the study, design, and intervention over the physical form of the city, including its buildings and the open spaces between them. In his opening speech at the Urban Design Conference – whose developments, years later, culminated in the creation of the first postgraduate program in urban design in 1960 –, Sert offered the following definition for this nascent field:

> Urban design is that part of city planning *which deals with the physical form of the city*. This is the most creative phase of city planning and that in which imagination and artistic capacities can play a more important part. It may also be in some respects the most difficult and controversial phase; and because of all these factors, it has been less explored than other aspects. With the new approach to architecture, landscape architecture, road engineering, and city planning, accepted formulas had to be thrown overboard. It is logical that the changes in all these fields have developed independently, each group trying to establish a new set of principles and a new language of forms. It now seems equally logical that the progress in the different professions be brought closer together, so that a *synthesis can be achieved in terms of urban design*. (Sert, 2009, p. 3. Transcript of the original 1956 speech, emphasis added).

Concurrently with this movement, and as a critical response to the collapse of modern functionalist urbanism articulated during the post-World War II period, another discipline emerged in Europe that also focused on the physical form of the city: Urban Morphology. Initially emerging through two schools of thought with distinct approaches — English and Italian — urban morphology sought to reclaim the value of urban dimensions that had previously been antagonized by modernist

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1 CIAM X took place in that same year of 1956; it was the penultimate in the series, and the first after Le Corbusier's departure from the organization, having abandoned it a year earlier. The congress had already faced criticism from the group of young architects that formed Team 10 in the meantime since the previous edition; this same group ended up declaring the dissolution of CIAM at its next edition, in 1959, which gathered only 43 participants.

thought, such as the marks of historical processes, traditional urban fabrics, and vernacular urban types; all elements linked to concepts of memory, identity, and belonging.[2] The recovery of these elements involved developing tools for mapping, typifying, interpreting, and analyzing urban form, but also understanding the processes that lead to its creation, conservation, transformation, or destruction. In summary, Costa and Netto define that 'Urban Morphology is the study of urban form, considering it a physical product of society's actions over the environment, which is build it over time' (2015, p. 31).

It can be surmised that both urban design and urban morphology emerged looking towards the same object — the physical form of cities — albeit with distinct agendas and methods. There is significant overlap between the two fields, but it is evident that while urban morphology assumes a more analytical approach towards the urban environment, urban design, in turn, is propositional or "prescriptive," aiming to intervene in urban space through the transformation of its form or the creation of new urban forms. From this, it can be inferred that, in fact, one field informs the action of the other: urban morphology offers a framework for understanding the various aspects of urban form and the processes that lead to its formation, so that urban design can, in turn, establish objectives, concepts, and methods to foster its transformation. However, the opposite flow also exists, given that the practice of urban design raises the formulation of new problems and new objects, which, in turn, demand new perspectives or even new analytical methods from urban morphology.

The historical evolution of both fields of knowledge, however, saw urban design rise to a new level, as it gradually emerged not only as an area of study but also as a field of professional practice, driven both by the development and increasing complexity of urban environments and by the proliferation of postgraduate programs in this field worldwide, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries. Likewise, the range of knowledge required for the work of the urban designer expanded, encompassing disciplines drawn from other fields of knowledge, such as ecology, psychology, and anthropology.

Urban design: an epistemology

In the early 1990s, Anne Vernez Moudon undertook a major effort to propose an epistemic framework for urban design, identifying and systematizing what she recognized as the universe of *all* areas of concentration relevant to work in this disciplinary field, presented in the article curiously titled "A Catholic Approach to Organizing What Urban Designers Should Know" (1992).[3] In this context, the use of the adjective "Catholic" must be understood in the secular meaning of this term,

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2 Urban morphology actually predates World War II through the work of German geographers, notably M.R.G. Conzen, who initiated the English school of urban morphology after emigrating to that country. The Italian school, on the other hand, traces its origins to the typomorphological studies developed by Saverio Muratori in Rome and Venice in the 1950s.

3 Moudon, 1992. p. 362-386. As we will discuss later, determining the most appropriate translation of the term "*urban designer*" to Latin languages in general, and Portuguese in particular, remains a significant challenge.

etymologically derived from the Greek language, meaning something like "broad in sympathies, tastes, and interests" (p. 362). The central idea of this approach was to distance oneself as much as possible from individual convictions, conceptions, and paradigms and adopt the most panoramic view possible, in order to recognize the varied contributions to the discipline and perceive the relationships between the various lines of thought. To this end, the author defines nine areas of concentration that in a certain way synthesize the universe of urban design, identifying the main texts and authors, as outlined in the table below:[4]

Concentration of enquiry	Date	Key texts	Contribution
1) Urban history studies	1920-	Mumford (1961) Morris (1972) Kostof (1991)	Study of the historical process of transformation of urban form (modification of uses, forms and meanings over time)
2) Picturesque studies	1950-	Cullen (1970) Halprin (1966) Sitte (1889)	Study of the visual attributes of urban form and urban landscape
3) Image studies	1960-1970	Lynch (1960) Appleyard et al. (1964) Ashihara (1983)	Study of the cognitive process through which people visualize, perceive, identify and understand urban space.
4) Environment-behaviour studies	1950-	Rapoport (1977) Gehl (1987) Lang (1987)	Study of the ways in which space interferes with behavior and social relationships
5) Place studies	1970	Norberg-Schulz (1980) Whyte (1988) Lynch (1981)	Study of identity or "spirit of place", "genius loci"
6) Material culture studies	1920-	Jackson (1980) Venturi et al. (1977)	Study of the built environment as a reflection of cultures and societies
7) Typology-morphology studies	1950-	Rossi (1966) Aymonimo (1975) Krier (1979)	Study of the physical attributes of urban form, systems of spatial and volumetric relations, and their transformation over time
8) Space-morphology studies	1950-	Alexander et al. (1977) Hillier & Hanson (1984)	Study of the fundamental characteristics and systems of urban geometry
9) Nature-ecology studies	1980-	McHarg (1971) Hough (1984) Spirn (1984)	Study of the relationships between natural processes and the built environment

Table 1 – Areas of concentration of Urban Design
Source: Adapted from Cuthbert, 2006, p. 253, based on Moudon, 1992, p. 362-386.

Based on this epistemic structure proposed by Moudon (1992), we can recognize that some of the fields of knowledge that inform urban design emerged from studies arising from areas of knowledge outside the traditional scope of architecture and urbanism, or are at the threshold or intersecting with them, as is the case, for example, of environment-behavior studies that come from environmental psychology; studies of place, which dialogue with phenomenology and philosophy; studies of material culture, which in turn stem from anthropology;

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4   For a synthetic review of each of these areas of study in Portuguese language, we suggest consulting Hepner, 2010, p. 51-58.

typo-morphological studies, which practically equate to urban morphology, also have their roots in geography.

Furthermore, considering that this epistemic framework was proposed over thirty years ago, when the phenomenon of neoliberal financial globalization and the creation of the World Wide Web were taking their first steps, we can conclude that this framework is quite outdated. Today, it would be necessary to incorporate into the epistemic framework of urban design several other fields of knowledge that impact urban form, emanating from areas such as economics (investigating the relationship of urban form with cycles of capitalist accumulation), sociology (the impacts of urban form on social relations, involving relationships of identity, domination, oppression, autonomy, etc.), or information technology (including the impacts of emerging technologies from Building Information Modeling to 'smart cities', urban data science, and, more recently, artificial intelligence).

Lost in translation: a new urban design

Although the expression 'urban design' is usually translated to Portuguese as '*desenho urbano*', the idea contained in the concept of 'design' is significantly weakened when substituted by the term '*desenho'* (pronounced: /dez e u/, a term more commonly translated to English as '*drawing'*), which is commonly understood in a more limited connotation, evoking only the act or product — the drawing itself — and less its underlying processes or objectives — intention, creation, transformation.

This linguistic incongruence creates considerable difficulty for a field of knowledge that, like urban design, has yet to find its place in Brazilian urbanism. Among the limited literature available in Portuguese, we note that there is no consensus on the most appropriate translation for the expression 'urban design' — just to cite its translation in the Brazilian Portuguese editions of three highly relevant works, we identified that it is translated as '*desenho urbano*' in '*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*'; as '*projeto urbano*' in '*The Condition of Postmodernity*'; and remains as '*design urbano*' in '*The Image of the City*'.[5]

In this paper we submit to the translation we have used in other writings before: *desenho urbano*. It is evident that the term '*desenho*' loses some of its potency when compared to the original term in English, but on the other hand, we also understand that this imprecision can be addressed through an effort to re-signify the concept of '*desenho*'. To this end, we can draw on a classic text by Vilanova Artigas, in which he argues that

> [...] *desenho*, if on the one hand is a risk, a trace, a mediation for the expression of a plan to be realized, the language of a constructive technique, on the other hand it is *des*ígnio,

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5   Respectively: Jacobs, 2000 [1961], p. 420; Harvey, 1992, p. 91 [1989]; Lynch, 1997 [1960], p. 129.

intention, purpose, a human project in the sense of a proposal of the spirit A spirit that creates new objects and introduces them into real life (Artigas,1968, p. 26, emphasis added).

In contrast, the translation of 'urban design' to Brazilian Portuguese as *projeto urbano'* ('urban project'), in our view, expresses the idea of a praxis oriented toward the individualized conception and implementation of projects 'in the urban', a set of actions of limited scope, and with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This runs counter to a broader view of urban design that understands it not only as both the study of and intervention over urban form, but also, and primarily, as the investigation of a continuous socio-spatial process: *the process through which the city acquires its form over time*, through the actions of society by the means of a myriad of agents acting in a manner that may sometimes be organized, but is generally dispersed or diffuse, and often conflicting.

This process is essentially conflictual, mediated, negotiated, contested, and contradictory; permeated by numerous conceptions, interests, and power relations. There is rarely a direct correlation between specific urban forms as they are observed in reality, and the existence of some underlying 'project'; save for very specific exceptions, such as in entirely planned/designed cities or districts, or in large urban projects led in a highly centralized manner, whether by the state or the capital. In other words, urban form, more often than not, 'emanates' from the intersection of numerous projects that combine, accumulate, interpose, overlap, and replace one another; and they do so according to a complex and diffuse logic or dynamic that we could understand as 'the urban design process'. This understanding is supported by the definition of urban design formulated by Alexander Cuthbert, to which we subscribe:

> Urban design is the study of how cities have achieved their physical form and the processes that go into renewing them. Urban design is not merely the art of designing cities, but the knowledge of how cities grow and change. *It is the study of how civilizations have chosen to represent themselves in spatial form, and the processes through which specific urban forms come about.* [...] Since all human action is infused with meaning, so the spaces we inhabit are also replete with symbolic values, collective memory, association, celebration and conflict. Ultimately, urban design is about the transmission of urban meaning in specific urban forms (Cuthbert, 2006, p. 1, emphasis added).

It is important to note that this emerging definition for the urban design process gives it a richer (or 'strong') meaning, distinct from what we might understand as the process of 'urbanization' (the process of 'turning urban') or the 'production of urban space' (the dynamic through which spaces, infrastructures, and buildings, understood as 'products' from a perspective aligned with Marxian historical

materialism, are produced with their respective use and exchange values). Indeed, urban design in this case could be understood as the social process that 'gives shape' to the city, encompassing all its rich patterns, tissues, types, senses, meanings, values, experiences, representations, and interpretations that are intrinsic to it.

...and in Brazil?

In Brazil, where the disciplinary field of urbanism has historically undergone a different process of epistemological development (which, in addition to not accommodating a separation between urban planning and design, has also always united the roles of the architect and the urban planner in a single professional education), theories of urban morphology and urban design have had relatively limited resonance. In the 1980s, there was some effort in Brazilian academia to disseminate urban design through three editions of the Seminar on Urban Design in Brazil (*Seminário sobre Desenho Urbano no Brasil* – SEDUR), hosted by the University of Brasília and organized by researchers from this institution, respectively in 1984, 1986, and 1988. Many of the scholars involved in these events had come into contact with urban design theories while in postgraduate programs abroad, primarily in the United States (Del Rio, 1990).

Since then, the theoretical framework focused on the study of urban form has certainly occupied its place among academic theses and dissertations, as well as been discussed within research groups scattered throughout the country, but still with relatively limited reach in broader forums of urban studies. Notable exceptions include the two editions of the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF) held in Brazil, in 2007 and 2024: respectively, in Ouro Preto, organized by Professor Staël de Alvarenga Costa of UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais); and in São Paulo, organized by Professors Heraldo Ferreira Borges and Denise Antonucci of Mackenzie Presbyterian University. In addition, annual meetings of the Lusophone Network of Urban Morphology have now reached their 14th edition, taking place either in Brazil or Portugal in alternating years.

We can speculate on some possible reasons for the low penetration of urban design into the epistemic roots of Brazilian urbanism. The first stems from the prolonged survival of modernist/functionalist urban planning practices in Brazil, embodied in the iconic Brasília project and later perpetuated in the authoritarian, technocratic 'developmentalism' of planning practices during the military dictatorship which lasted until the mid-1980s. The second is the much closer link between Brazilian urbanism and the matrix of French urban planning than towards that of the Anglo-Saxon universe that gave birth to the discipline of urban design. Brazilian contemporary urban planning still maintains a close relation with the instruments of territorial planning developed by the French welfare state during 'Thirty Glorious' years which served as inspiration for the main urban planning instruments consolidated in the belated Brazilian *Estatuto da Cidade (*the chapter

of the Brazilian Constitution that defines a general framework for urban policies, adopted in 2001), such as the municipal Masterplans (*Planos Diretores*), the Onerous Grant of Construction Rights (*Outorga Onerosa do Direito de Construir*), the Special Zones of Social Interest (*Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social – ZEIS*), or Urban Consortium Operations (*Operações Urbanas Consorciadas*) (Ferreira, 2022).

More importantly, over the past three decades, a robust critical urban thought has emerged in Brazilian academia, with Marxist and Lefebvrian roots, resistant to pressure from the hegemonic projects and models of central capitalism and the expansion of neoliberalism. This current, attentive to relevant national agendas, such as the right to the city, social justice, the pursuit of urban reform — in short, the harsh realities that mark the peripheries of Brazilian metropolises and their subjugated and excluded populations — has developed important contributions to understanding the formation of the urban reality of Brazilian cities, as well as to informing visions of the future for transformation projects. Ermínia Maricato, in one of her most well-known texts, highlights some elements of this agenda:

> The construction of the new urbanistic matrix involves eliminating the gap between urban planning and management. It also requires a new holistic approach, which does not exhaust the scope of local plans or decentralized participatory decisions. But, perhaps most importantly, it cannot ignore *the need to deconstruct dominant representations of the city or the need for a new symbology committed to democratic praxis* (Maricato, 2000, p. 169, emphasis added)

Could urban morphology and urban design have something to contribute to the construction of this new, holistic urbanistic matrix? One of the characteristics that can be recognized in the works of many of the key authors of this critical camp is a conviction that constructing one's own interpretations of Brazilian urban reality necessarily involves rejecting uncritically imported models, especially in a context marked by the incisive action of 'thinktanks' aligned with international organizations committed to a specific development paradigm (World Bank, IDB, IMF, etc.) which usually echo hegemonic thinking and approaches, replete with 'best practice' manuals and prepackaged, ready-to-use solutions.

This naturally creates some difficulty in reconciling Brazilian critical thought with the theoretical framework of urban morphology or urban design, given their general association, from this respective point of view, with the practice of urban planning in central capitalist countries. Indeed, on the rare occasions where any consideration is given towards the practice of urban design in the national critical literature, it is usually from a negative perspective, for example as pondered by Otília Arantes:

> (...) I have my doubts about the chances of urban design becoming an efficient instrument for the development of

life in the city. The very expression 'urban design' (instead of planning), because of the restrictions it carries, seems to announce this narrowing of the possibilities for real change, which, on an ideological level, (...), reflects the kind of renunciation forced by the irreversible *debâcle* of the Modern Movement. This shrinkage is not only due to the direct interference of the interests at stake, of the true urban agents or promoters of public space: governments – most often concerned with transforming the city into an advertisable image – or the usual real estate speculators (landowners, construction companies, etc.) (Arantes, 2001, p. 122)

Therefore, we ask: what is the place of urban morphology and design in the context of Brazilian critical urbanism? Any effort to bring these disciplines closer to Brazilian critical thought quickly runs up against the fact that the epistemology of urban morphology, and to a greater extent, that of urban design, is largely built on a theoretical basis almost entirely 'imported' from central capitalist countries. The defense of more openness to such foreign theoretical framework, as we intend to articulate in this paper, may even seem relatively contradictory in the current context of increasing criticism about the coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2005), especially at a time when 'several planning scholars advocate for a (de)colonisation of planning theory by 'decolonizing the mind' and illustrate an insurgent planning practice that aims at overcoming a mindset of 'inferiority of the colonized and superiority of the colonizer" (Ortiz, 2023, p. 184).

Without intending to develop, within the limited space of this paper, an examination of the studies that problematize Eurocentrism or the coloniality and imperiality of power relations within 'modernity' or the current 'world-system', it is worth noting that, in our view, their confrontation can, and should, utilize the tools at our disposal, wherever they come from — especially when we realize that certain knowledges originating from central capitalist countries are themselves undergoing a moment of critical reformulation, as we can identify in the contributions of some foreign authors in the field of urban design. Therefore, we argue that

[...] resistance to imperiality depends on a decolonial imaginary capable of processing modernity using its available tools. Failing to see, in modernity, possibilities for ruptures, resistance, alternatives, and counter-hegemonies means rejecting the very decolonial transformations that exist within modernity [...] (Ballestrin, 2017, p. 533).

Given that, in Brazil, specific theories for the study of urban form are still a field under construction, we argue that it is nearly impossible, or at least highly unproductive, to work on them without relying extensively on available foreign literature; in other words, without accepting that this effort inevitably involves importing and translating, but also interpreting and critiquing, the fundamental

thoughts and concepts of this disciplinary field, that have been, and continue to be, developed out there, 'in the center'.

Just to cite a few examples of recent, significant works that stablish relevant dialogue with urban design or urban morphology, focused specifically on the city of São Paulo (the largest in Brazil), we can highlight the one developed by Noto (2017), which discusses the possibility of adopting the block as a regulatory unit for the transformation of urban form, and which received the Capes Thesis Award in 2018; the research developed by Tessari (2024), which uses the methods of urban morphology to critically analyze the urban forms that characterize the Paraisópolis *favela*; and the book by Nigrielo (2024), which presents the evolution of the metropolis through the design of its paths, understood as intentions underlying the formation of its space, and which recently received the 2025 Academic Jabuti Award in the Architecture, Urbanism, Design and Urban and Regional Planning category.

Final considerations: a necessary reconciliation

Retaking the ideas defended by Cuthbert (2006), we can consider that urban design is also a social practice that occurs independently of what is written or theorized about it, in such a way so that the act of *building in the city* (the production of urban space, whether undertaken by the state, capital, or labor) is also, concomitantly and invariably, an act of *shaping the city* and, therefore, an act of urban design. Urban space cannot be simply manufactured like a commodity on an assembly line; its production always results in a design, intentional or unintentional, that carries within itself meanings that transcend the sphere of the production-consumption dichotomy.

This means that urban design must be understood primarily as a process that permeates the dialectic between society and space, since, as we argue, it is through the urban design process that society shapes urban space. Thus, it is also through this same urban design process that what we consider as 'the urban' incorporates meanings, transmits messages, and effectively embodies representations and values that can be interpreted by society. This places urban design, therefore, clearly in the realm of the symbolic and, ultimately, of ideology, understood here in its 'strong' sense—not as a 'set of ideas', but rather as a 'system of representations' that teaches us how to think and to act.[6] On this issue, Cuthbert argues that

> (...) urban design is an instrument of class politics as well as an important method of social control or liberation. It constitutes the space where political ideologies are played out in concrete form. While the role of economic systems

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6   Marilena Chauí explains that "Ideology, a specific form of the modern social imaginary, is the necessary way in which social agents represent to themselves the social, economic, and political appearance, such that this appearance (which we should not simply take as synonymous with illusion or falsehood), being the immediate and abstract mode of manifestation of the historical process, is the concealment or dissimulation of reality. Fundamentally, *ideology is a systematic body of representations and norms that 'teach' us how to know and act*." (2007, p. 15, emphasis added)

in creating spatial structures is well understood, exactly how ideological systems do the same thing remains open terrain. Not only does urban space provide the theatre for social struggle, as many great urban spaces will attest, it is also the ultimate symbolic representation of the conflicts, aspirations, and values of past generations. The complex matrix of buildings and spaces in all great cities embraces us with the stories, philosophies, consciousnesses, religions, wars, heroes and heroines, of the failures, victories, and dreams of our ancestors, all immortalized within the public realm (Cuthbert, 2006, p. 80).

Now, if we accept the idea that urban design is the process through which the city acquires its form; and that it is also a science and a technique that allows urbanists to understand and guide this process (further supported by urban morphology and other disciplines), then we must recognize that this disciplinary field certainly has something important to contribute. Furthermore, if we recognize that urban form and its complex system of signs and representations is practically 'ideology in solid form' — since it significantly delimits the reality of our urban lives — then it becomes impossible not to recognize the transformative potential of urban design both as study as well as practice.

Thus, we argue that urban design and urban morphology are not inherently technocratic, alienated, or colonizing simply because they were formulated, primarily, in central capitalist countries. As in any field of knowledge, we find authors of the most diverse orientations, many of whom are committed to a critical stance and engaged in the transformation of society and urban space towards more just, democratic, and sustainable cities. Both include useful and necessary knowledge and methods for qualifying the transformation of Brazilian cities, especially to dismantle the main dominant representation of the city: its own urban form. The reconciliation between urban design and urban morphology with Brazilian critical urban thought is as urgent as it is necessary.

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