

## Urban Morphology in Brazil: the ugly duckling?

## Morfologia Urbana no Brasil: o patinho feio?

## Morfología Urbana en Brasil: ¿el patito feo?

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### Abstract

This article introduces the thematic issue dedicated to Urban Morphology, presenting its conceptual, historical, and methodological foundations and highlighting its relevance to research, teaching, and professional practice in urban planning and design. Drawing on Italian, British, and French traditions, it discusses the formation of the field and its main analytical elements — buildings, plots, and streets — organized across multiple scales and grounded in the temporal dimension as a key interpretive lens for understanding urban transformation. It argues that, although Urban Morphology has achieved international recognition and consolidation, in Brazil the field still faces reductionist perceptions, institutional fragmentation, and disciplinary marginalization. Based on classical and contemporary references, the article proposes strengthening the dialogue between theory and practice, expanding its presence in Architecture and Urbanism curricula, and renewing the research agenda with a focus on critical territorial analysis, the development of analytical tools, and support for design and urban policies. By challenging persistent misconceptions and invoking the “ugly duckling” metaphor, the article advocates repositioning Urban Morphology as a foundational field for the



qualified understanding and intervention in contemporary cities, contributing to more sensitive, rigorous, and transformative urban practices.

**Keywords:** Urban morphology; Urban form; Urban history; Urban design; Urban transformation.

## Resumo

Este artigo introduz a edição temática dedicada à Morfologia Urbana, apresentando seus fundamentos conceituais, históricos e metodológicos e destacando sua importância para a pesquisa, o ensino e a prática do planejamento e do projeto urbano. Partindo das tradições italiana, inglesa e francesa, discute-se a constituição do campo e seus principais elementos – edifícios, lotes e ruas – organizados em diferentes escalas e pela dimensão temporal como chave interpretativa fundamental para compreender as transformações urbanas. Argumenta-se que, embora a Morfologia Urbana tenha alcançado reconhecimento e consolidação internacional, no Brasil, o campo ainda enfrenta percepções reducionistas, fragmentação institucional e marginalização disciplinar. A partir de referências clássicas e contemporâneas, propõe-se fortalecer o diálogo entre teoria e prática, ampliar sua inserção nos currículos de Arquitetura e Urbanismo e renovar a agenda de pesquisa com foco na leitura crítica do território, na produção de instrumentos analíticos e no suporte ao projeto e às políticas urbanas. Ao tensionar equívocos persistentes e mobilizar a metáfora do “patinho feio”, o artigo defende o reposicionamento da Morfologia Urbana como campo estruturante para a compreensão e a intervenção qualificada nas cidades contemporâneas, contribuindo para práticas urbanas mais sensíveis, fundamentadas e transformadoras.

**Palavras-chave:** Morfologia urbana; Forma urbana; História da cidade; Projeto urbano; Transformação urbana.

## Resumen

Este artículo introduce la edición temática dedicada a la Morfología Urbana, presentando sus fundamentos conceptuales, históricos y metodológicos y destacando su relevancia para la investigación, la enseñanza y la práctica del planeamiento y del diseño urbano. A partir de las tradiciones italiana, inglesa y francesa, se discute la formación del campo y sus principales elementos analíticos — edificios, parcelas y calles — organizados en diferentes escalas y articulados por la dimensión temporal como clave interpretativa fundamental para comprender las transformaciones urbanas. Se argumenta que, aunque la Morfología Urbana ha alcanzado reconocimiento y consolidación internacional, en Brasil el campo aún enfrenta percepciones reduccionistas, fragmentación institucional y marginación disciplinar. Basándose en referencias clásicas y contemporáneas, el artículo propone fortalecer el diálogo entre teoría y práctica, ampliar su presencia en los planes de estudio de Arquitectura y Urbanismo y renovar la agenda de investigación con énfasis en la lectura crítica del territorio, el desarrollo de herramientas analíticas y el apoyo al diseño y a las políticas urbanas. Al cuestionar equívocos persistentes y movilizar la metáfora del “patito feo”,



el artículo defiende reposicionar la Morfología Urbana como un campo estructurante para la comprensión y la intervención cualificada en las ciudades contemporáneas, contribuyendo a prácticas urbanas más sensibles, rigurosas y transformadoras.

**Palabras clave:** Morfología urbana; Forma urbana; Historia de la ciudad; Diseño urbano; Transformación urbana.

## INTRODUÇÃO

**U**rban morphology, the central theme of this volume of the *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo* of the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo (PPGAU) of the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie (FAU-UPM), consolidated itself as a disciplinary field from the mid-20th century onwards, when its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological foundations were primarily structured by Italian and English researchers committed to understanding and explaining the physical and spatial organization of cities. However, as early as the 19th century, significant intellectual movements were already preparing the ground for this consolidation. Authors such as Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, in France, through the elaboration of the concept of typology, and Johannes Fritz, in Germany, using maps as instruments to interpret urban history and track the progress and transformations of the physical structure of cities, developed pioneering reflections that anticipated the foundations of urban morphology.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, these ideas matured until they made possible the almost simultaneous and independent emergence of two consolidated theoretical strands: the Italian school, led by the architect Saverio Muratori, who in 1959 published *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, and the English school, marked by the publication in 1960 of *Alnwick, Northumberland: A Study in Town-Plan Analysis* by the key figure of this school, the German geographer M. R. G. Conzen. Both were devoted to the analysis of urban form. Since then, the field has expanded and diversified.

Over the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of publications, in the variety of specialized journals, and in the organization of conferences dedicated to the theme. A decisive milestone was the creation, in 1994, of the *International Seminar on Urban Form* (ISUF), the first international organization dedicated to morphological research. From it emerged the journal *Urban Morphology* and various national and regional associations that strengthened scientific exchange and the maturation of the field. In addition, the first textbook on urban morphology, *Urban Morphology* (Oliveira, 2016), and the first book on the subject in Portuguese, *Fundamentos da Morfologia Urbana* (Pereira Costa; Netto, 2015), were published.



This recent vitality must be understood in light of a much older object of study than the disciplinary field itself: the physical form of urban areas. Since the earliest civilizations, dense settlements already displayed recognizable morphological configurations, although the systematic study of these structures only gained traction in the late 19th century. The contemporary expansion of cities and the growing complexity of urbanized territories have further increased the relevance of this analytical perspective.

In addition to examining forms and spatial structures, urban morphology considers the agents and institutions involved in their production and transformation—developers, architects, builders, planners, public managers, and organized civil society, recognizing them as participants in the dynamic process of shaping the city.

In light of, and despite, this international recognition of the relevance of urban morphology and the fact that Brazil has already hosted two ISUF seminars (in Ouro Preto in 2009, coordinated by Professor Staël de Alvarenga Pereira Costa; and in São Paulo in 2024, coordinated by myself and Professor Denise Antonucci) one question imposes itself: why do imprecise and reductionist interpretations of the study of urban form still persist in the Brazilian academic context? It is not uncommon for outdated conceptions to continue shaping the debate, even in leading institutions. The well-known “Buarquian fable” – already deconstructed by Professor Nestor Goulart Reis Filho in 1968 in his *livre-docência* thesis – of the “tiler” and the “sower,” as well as the preconception that urban form is merely a residue of large social, economic, cultural, and political dynamics, exemplify historically influential but theoretically insufficient views in light of recent advances.

Urban morphology seeks to overcome such reductionisms by understanding the city not merely as a product of overarching urban dynamics but as a structure endowed with its own spatial logic, with patterns, continuities, and transformations that can be systematically analyzed. Discussing these entrenched conceptual anachronisms is crucial to explaining why morphological thinking still occupies a marginal position in academic training and professional practice, and at the same time, to highlight its importance in interpreting and designing cities.

In this regard, the reflection of Anne Vernez Moudon, professor at the University of Washington, is particularly revealing. In an interview with Professor Alessandro Filla Rosanelli (2009), Moudon was asked to comment on Peter Marcuse’s interpretation expressed in *“The Grid as City Plan”* (1987), according to which “urban form is residual,” that is, the product of clashes among socioeconomic and political interests. From this perspective, urban planning and design—being primarily conducted by architects and planners—would occupy only a secondary role in the shaping of cities. Faced with this provocation, D. Anne Vernez Moudon Shach-Pinsly replied:



I think that may explain why morphology “is” or “is not” considered as an important part of thinking about the city. For instance, Lynch was certainly more interested in the social, political, and psychological forces that shaped the city. He often said that he did not care about what the city was “physically” but instead cared about what “people thought or felt” about the city. Marcuse’s (and in essence, Lynch’s) has a “post structuralist”, “post constructivist” attitude, it could also be “Gestalt,” where the object (urban form) does not exist, except the eye to beholder. I have no problem with that stand as a philosophical one. However, this stand is instrumentally very limited, because it does not help us understand how cities are actually made. To understand how the city is made, going into people’s heads and figuring out how they conceive the city, how they want to live in it, etc., is not sufficient. We have to know “what” is being made as well, no matter how and why it’s made. The city is in part a collective object. A planner cannot easily go into the head of a collectivity and figure out exactly what they thought or wanted about their city. So, I think that considering or not considering the physical form of the city is a basic ideological and intellectual kind of issue that people like Marcuse and Lynch and so on, have unfortunately refused to face. While the city, the building, the street-block may indeed exist in the eye of the beholder, we as planners cannot take into the account all of the eyes of all the beholders, it is just a impossibility. In view of this impossibility, the planner can take an “artistic” approach and say, like Lynch, well, we will try to understand as much as possible how people conceive, understand, feel about the city, and then I will “go” from there and giving it my best and try working in groups to get to the collective shape of the city (Rosaneli, A. F.; Shach-Pinsly, 2009, s.p.).

By defending a scientific approach, Moudon argues that the analysis of urban form must focus on the objective aspects of physical reality, for it is over these that architects and planners have effective control. The political process, shaped by choices, interests, and power disputes, is decisive; however, once decisions are made, the professional’s sphere of action falls upon the tangible dimension of the city, that is, the built space.

Although symbolic and subjective dimensions are fundamental to urban experience, it is the physical reality that constitutes the common ground of observation, the starting point for measuring, interpreting, and comparing the different expressions of the urban. The morphological approach does not claim to be the only true one but offers a shared empirical basis for understanding the city in its materiality and, from it, accessing meanings, uses, and values.



As Moudon emphasizes, architects and planners do not design *places* but *Spaces*, they shape the structure upon which places emerge socially. Returning to Marcuse, one must recognize the limits of architects' and planners' power: every intervention involves risks and uncertainties, and results do not always meet users' expectations. Therefore, design practice must be grounded in a historical and long-term vision, guided by the cues society provides and by the lasting value of the built environment not merely by social urgencies or market dynamics.

Once the relevance of urban morphology as a field of knowledge and practice is established, it becomes necessary to define *what* to study (object) and *how* to study it (methods and tools).

In this regard, Moudon highlights the importance of scales of observation, articulated in the subfields of micromorphology and macromorphology, which reveal the hierarchical organization of elements in the built landscape. She systematizes three fundamental principles of morphological analysis:

1. Urban form is defined by three essential physical components: buildings and their open spaces, plots, and streets.
2. This form can be analyzed at different levels of resolution, corresponding to the building and its plot, the block, the city, and the region.
3. Urban form can only be fully understood historically, since its elements are in constant transformation.

These three principles, form, resolution, and time, combine in different ways according to the object and purpose of investigation. The development of these propositions, the result of parallel collaborations among schools and researchers, produced distinct theoretical orientations but preserved a common core: the city can be read through its form.

The consolidation of this shared theoretical and conceptual nucleus, recognizing urban form as the material and historical expression of the city's transformations, paved the way for the systematization of different modes of investigation.

In 1997, Anne Vernez Moudon proposed a systematizing reading of the field, distinguishing three major "schools" – English, Italian, and French – each associated with specific disciplinary and methodological traditions. This classification, presented in *Urban Morphology as an Emerging Interdisciplinary Field*, became a reference by making explicit the field's diversity of origins and purposes. In summary: the English school, rooted in geography, adopted a descriptive and analytical approach; the Italian school, developed by architects, consolidated a typological and design-oriented perspective; and the French school, from the late 1960s onward, linked the analysis of physical form to the social and ideological dimensions of built space, with figures such as Philippe Panerai and Jean Castex, in dialogue with Henri Lefebvre.



Although this distinction was widely accepted, it was later relativized. Many authors recognized that, despite historical and disciplinary differences, these traditions share the same set of theoretical questions and methodological structures aimed at understanding the physical form of the city and its transformation over time. Accordingly, Kropf (2009), in *Aspects of Urban Form*, proposed replacing the notion of “schools” with four methodological approaches: geographical, typological, configurational, and processual. More flexible and cross-disciplinary, this typology has been widely adopted for reflecting the field’s interdisciplinary and convergent nature.

Despite their different origins and emphases, there is one essential conceptual point of convergence: the urban plot. It constitutes the basic morphological unit, the link connecting the scale of the building to that of the block and, consequently, to the urban structure as a whole. The plot is the “pivot” of urban form, as it allows the understanding of building typologies, spatial uses and appropriations, and aggregation patterns that give rise to the urban fabric. From observing plots, their size, shape, orientation, and relationship with public space, it becomes possible to understand how buildings are organized, how blocks are structured, and ultimately how the city itself is configured.

Thus, although Moudon emphasized historical differences among schools and Kropf reformulated typologies into broader methodological approaches, both converge on the idea that the analysis of the urban plot is the common starting point for any reading of urban form. It is within it that morphology reveals its explanatory power: the plot is simultaneously element and structure, part and whole, memory and possibility of the city.

In conclusion, urban morphology asserts itself as a relevant interdisciplinary field essential to the understanding of urban settlements, positioned at the intersection of geography, architecture, urban design, and urban planning. This integration supports both the theoretical explanation of urban form and its practical application in planning and design. Scales of analysis range from the plot and the building to intra-urban regions and entire cities, enabling readings that connect structure, process, and meaning. Its value lies in offering a systematic treatment of the fundamental attributes of urban form, combined with an investigative, integrative, and applicable approach that unites methodological rigor with historical and cultural sensitivity.

Yet, a gap still persists between the potential of urban morphology and its effective incorporation into planning practices. Bridging this gap requires building stronger connections between morphological knowledge and design action – an essential condition for improving contemporary urbanism. ISUF has played a central role in this effort, encouraging the integration of teaching, research, and professional practice, and fostering dialogue between urban morphology and other disciplinary fields.





Thus, this volume of the *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo* of the PPGAU of FAU-UPM presents itself as an invitation to the reader to recognize and mobilize Urban Morphology as an inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary tool, applicable to Design Workshops, Urban Planning Studios, Scientific Initiations, final undergraduate projects, dissertations and theses, as well as to professional practices in urban planning and design. More than an analytical tool, it is a field capable of articulating theory, method, and practice, informing both the critical reading of the territory and the construction of qualified and well-founded interventions.

If, as the subtitle of this article suggests, Urban Morphology is still treated in Brazil as an “ugly duckling” and, at times, seen as secondary, outdated, or excessively technical, the texts gathered here seek to demonstrate precisely the opposite: that understanding urban form is a strategic condition for improving design, research, and professional action. By recognizing its explanatory and propositional power, we discover that the “ugly duckling” never truly was; it simply lacked a more attentive gaze, more rigorous training, and the intellectual courage to confront old disciplinary prejudices and affirm Urban Morphology as a structuring matrix for thinking about, teaching, and transforming cities.

Brazilian cities, complex, challenging, and in constant transformation, will surely be grateful.

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