

Andri Gerber, Regula Iseli, Stefan Kurath, Urs Primas (Eds.)  
**THE MORPHOLOGY OF URBAN LANDSCAPES**



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# THE MORPHOLOGY OF URBAN LANDSCAPES

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# Table of contents

<i>Urs Primas, Andri Gerber, Regula Iseli, Stefan Kurath</i> <b>Introduction</b> .....	7
 <b>PART I IN SEARCH OF A SYNTHESIS</b> .....	22
<i>Luca Ortelli</i> <b>The dissolution of cities</b> .....	23
<i>Andri Gerber</i> <b>Saverio Muratori and Aldo Rossi: near-converging vanishing points</b> .....	37
<i>Paola Viganò</i> <b>Types, prototypes and the project of the city</b> .....	49
<i>Catherine Blain and Marlène Ghorayeb</i> <b>France: from history to urban project</b> .....	63
<i>Lars Marcus</i> <b>The emergence of second form: The urgent need for the advancement of morphology in architecture</b> .....	77
<i>Urs Primas</i> <b>Cells, Nodes and Patterns</b> Combining Process Typology and Space Syntax .....	87
<i>Karl Kropf</i> <b>The minimum unit of built form: a sketch</b> .....	107
<i>Sylvain Malfroy</i> <b>Awakening in Florence</b> .....	123
<i>André Bideau</i> <b>Metamorphoses of space – approaching André Corboz</b> .....	147

<b>PART II STORIA OPERANTE</b> .....	162
<i>Karsten Ley</i>	
<b>The urban space as a research and design subject</b> .....	163
<i>Regula Iseli</i>	
<b>Applied Morphology</b> .....	175
<i>Erich Raith</i>	
<b>A seed on Viennese soil</b> .....	185
<i>Sören Schöbel</i>	
<b>Morphology and typology in landscape architecture on the regional scale</b> .....	197
<i>Frank Zierau</i>	
<b>At the beginning the end is not yet in sight</b>	
An art historian and an architect form a team.....	209
<i>Susanne Komossa and Nicola Marzot</i>	
<b>A pragmatic approach to typo-morphology and city transformation</b>	
A study in the tradition of the ‘storia operante’.....	221
<i>Stefan Kurath</i>	
<b>On “things” in urban design</b> .....	235
<i>Max Bosshard</i>	
<b>Afterword</b> .....	243
Biographies.....	252
Image rights.....	257

*Paola Viganò*

# Types, prototypes and the project of the city

## What is the city made of?

On a cyclical basis, we observe the massing and accumulation of objects and forms in our contemporary cities. With similar regularity, we question whether there is a need to innovate their vocabulary and rethink the sequences, order and proximity of the different urban materials within them. We observe the spatial hybridisations that are produced, and increasingly often we conjure up new ones to respond to new lifestyles and, more generally, the issues raised by the different transitions we are going through.

In all these cases, the concept of type (and of its study, typology) becomes relevant again, even when it comes up against new criticisms or, instead, receives unprecedented appreciation. It has become central again, albeit in a profoundly different context to the one within which the typo-morphological analysis developed in the second half of the 20th century, and today's context is certainly even more distant from Durand's typological research of the late 18th and 19th century which structured the types of the modern city. However, the return of the type is supported by both traditions and by their digressions and transcriptions: namely, by the typo-morphological and the Durand traditions. My hypothesis is that the two traditions can be differentiated, if synthetically and perhaps too schematically, in the following way: firstly, by viewing the type as part of a dynamic process of adaptation and transformation, and secondly, by considering the type as a tool and expression of the modern biopolitical project. I will discuss both traditions, but I will invert the chronological order and start with the most recent one: type as a process.

## Developing a new manual of the gaze

According to Pierre Bourdieu, "The social world is accumulated history,"<sup>1</sup> but it is also accumulated spaces through which we orient ourselves, starting with what in our eyes seems to repeat or differentiate itself. The notion of type is strictly

linked to both these concepts, namely repetition and differentiation: we recognise a “type” – of building, open space, infrastructure – because we distinguish the repetition of some elements (sometimes due to unwritten rules, or, on the contrary, belonging to the regulations that set them). The “type” is revealed through the existence of a common basis from which we perceive differences and anomalies, variations and possible interpretations. The type varies over time and space, but the fact that something shows up again is referenced in the reflections of Gilles Deleuze on repetition: the irreducibility of the subject that cannot be interchanged except through repetition that maintains its individuality – the irreplaceable singularity in its constant re-emergence. The reference here is to the unique, which has no equals or equivalents<sup>2</sup>. The notion of type speaks of repetition as the “universality of the singular”<sup>3</sup>. However, unlike the opposition proposed by Gilles Deleuze between difference and repetition, the notion of type also contains and structures all the differences and variations found (generated by constants and variables), from a single detail to the highest levels of generality. Here, difference is intended as the “generality of the particular”<sup>4</sup>.

In the traces that each typological history is capable of bringing to light, the particular and the unique lie side by side and intertwine, offering interpretative paths that refer to the inhabited space, its forms, and the practices that empower and construct them: the space that arises from the sum of our very traces<sup>5</sup>.

## **Reconditioning: the analysis of material conditions**

A static conception of the type does not help us to discern the malleable potential of inhabited space within the tangled stratification of fabrics. We need a gaze capable of distinguishing between what could last and what could guide the transformation, even becoming unrecognisable and losing an assigned role, disappearing and freeing up space for new uses and possibilities. This work involves distinction and selection based on the capacity to read the type through and together with the transformations that led it, in different contexts, to become what it is. An understanding of the process inevitably combines the reading of space with that of other forms which are expressed and adapted in that same space and time: these are the settlement principles that account for geographies and topologies, building types and economic and social forms. The typological history of the merchant row house of Caniggia and Maffei and the interpretation of the ancient centre of the city of Pesaro by the Gruppo Architettura are helpful examples that should be taken up and reread in-depth, precisely for the unprecedented attention we now pay to recovery, reuse and reconditioning, and to the issue of the embodied energy enclosed in our infinite urban territories<sup>6</sup>.

Typology, here, is the study of types, the critical examination of the processes that shape and transform anthropic structures. It questions how an object is, not



Fig. 1: Gruppo Architettura, *Plan of the ancient centre of Pesaro*, 1974

how it was made, but in what state it reaches us, with all the inputs linked to its gradual alteration, development and changing role. According to Caniggia and Maffei, it is the product of spontaneous consciousness (the house as it is constructed in a certain period, in a certain culture and place). The typological process consists of a succession of changes over time and distinctions in space, according to reciprocal influences between space and time. The tangible space of living is constructed within this relationship and its historicity and unicity defined<sup>7</sup>.

In the 1970s, the Gruppo Architettura<sup>8</sup> contested the frequent interpretation of the ancient city's supposed homogeneity, which made it extraneous to the rest of the city and separate from it; the ancient city is in fact heterogeneous in terms of its *material* structure, which is usually scarcely considered. One of the Gruppo Architettura's criticisms of the ancient centre's planning tradition was the lack of understanding of its *material* conditions<sup>9</sup>. An urban analysis does not distance the architects from the social context in which their intervention is placed; on the

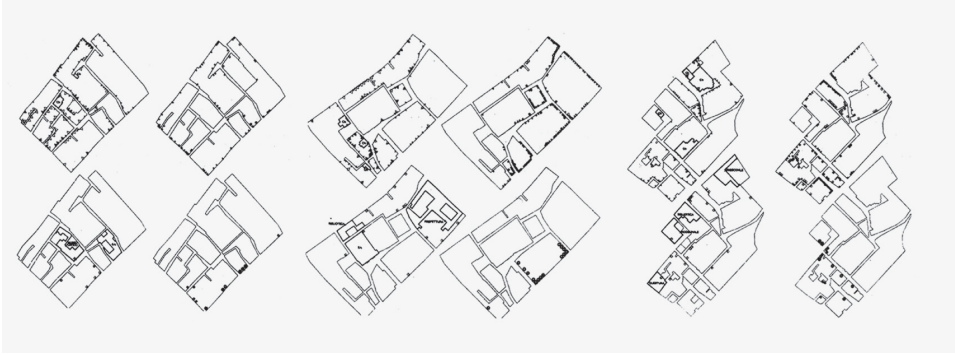


Fig. 2: Gruppo Architettura, *Plan of the ancient centre of Pesaro, Details*, 1974

contrary, it represents a specific tool of investigation and interpretation. It is precisely the analysis of the *material conditions*, taking into account the social conditions and objectives in relation to the physicality of the space, that questions the idea of total conservation. In fact, when asked about the need to conserve, Carlo Aymonino ironically quotes three prevalent reasons: one, from Leonardo Benevolo: memory as a requirement of contemporary life; two, the conservationist association *Italia Nostra*: because it is a universal heritage; and three, the designers of the famous Bologna plan for the protection of the ancient centre: because the historic centre is a place of social balance<sup>10</sup>. These three positions, in addition to bringing up many misconceptions, leave one question unanswered: for whom should we conserve? The analysis of the *material conditions* seeks to acquire the knowledge necessary to answer this question: “Material conditions means not only sociological stratification, but primarily the distribution of properties, differentiated production methods, the cost of rents and land, the ongoing transformation of the classes.”<sup>11</sup>

## Critical survey

The survey represents the fundamental cognitive tool used to interpret and design the ancient centre of Pesaro in the plan realised between 1971 and 1974 by the Gruppo Architettura<sup>12</sup>. The survey focuses on the types (meaning the distribution pattern, dimensions and recurring elements, the single building units) in order to understand the organisational-structural aspects rather than the stylistic-formal ones, and the social stratification – to define the user characteristics. New, on-site, direct investigations were necessary to understand the complexity and specificity of the relation among types of urban morphology and the character and nature of its constituent-built fabric, always including its process of change. The notions of “rilievo critico” (critical survey) and “material culture” inspired this approach, namely, in efforts at preservation that included the reconstruction of the evolutionary process of individual buildings, as proposed by Francesco Dogliani<sup>13</sup>.

The fundamental image of the ancient centre survey is that of the building structure, which contains the ground floors of all the blocks included within the first perimeter of the conservation area. This is the first time since Muratori's studies on the Venetian fabric and the text *La città di Padova*<sup>14</sup> that a plan is not of the ground floor of some parts, or of some special or public buildings (as in the famous Nolli map mentioned and reformulated by Venturi, Izenour and Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*), but instead of the entire wall and distribution structure of the ancient fabric. Finally, over 1,100 interviews were conducted to compare the characteristics and types of users and accommodation in order to comprehend the social stratification, the housing stock and properties.

Alterations to the city over time are mainly observed from two points of view. The first is the history of space, its forms and its relationships with society, that is represented; the second is the analysis of the degree of inertia to transformation that determines the permanence of parts and the recognition of parts with a high degree of transformability. As Aymomino et al state, this transformability is due to the fact that they have "lost their original role" and due to "the morphological destructuring conditions that distinguished them".<sup>15</sup> In the first sense, "the 'civil' and 'civic' meaning of the urban centre"<sup>16</sup> assumes a new value, "urban facts"<sup>17</sup> reemerge, defined over the passage of time, and around which a new urban foundation can be imagined. "The urban analysis facilitates an initial assessment of what remains of the built heritage and why, and what can be or must be transformed".<sup>18</sup>

## An analytical project

The Gruppo Architettura considers design activity as an analytical construction<sup>19</sup>, as expressed in a more in-depth and explicit way by some of its exponents, such as Gian Ugo Polesello. They pursue the decomposition of the city based on different levels of investigation and detect the constitutive elements of the urban figure: "Correlating them with each other by virtue of the standards identified and revealing their primary characteristics of invariance and stability, permanence and variability."<sup>20</sup> The research analyses the city by cross-referencing buildings and open spaces, façades, building types, gardens, grouped as *unità di percorso* ("path units") that reinterpret the urban space in design terms, renewing its practicability. The path represents "the recognition of a specific physical and spatial urban structure."<sup>21</sup>

The common matrix of the Gruppo Architettura has its roots in the school of architecture in Venice; this is significant as it explains the joint presence of substantial theoretical and research work and the parallel management of tangible aspects of its implementation. The analysis contains assumptions about the material development of the contemporary city which were theoretically formulated in the text *La città di Padova*. Its central theme is the study of the relationship between the morphological development and the building types identifiable in different parts of the city. The city of Padua was chosen as an object of study due to its complexity characterised by a historical dimension that can be recognised through the persistence

of medieval forms, by its geographical dimension in the contemporary age, and by continuity of growth in different historical periods. The influence of the “School of Venice” is broken down into the contrast between Saverio Muratori and Giuseppe Samonà, who both had a strong impact on the Gruppo Architettura. The hypothesis of identity between history and planning derives, for example, from Muratori who describes it in an organicist sense establishing the necessary relationships between type and fabric: “the type can only be identified in its tangible application, that is in a building fabric. In turn, a building fabric can only be identified within its absolute boundary, that is the urban organism; the total value of an urban organism can only be understood in its historical dimension...”<sup>22</sup> Reality is established over time through a succession of reactions and processes of growth starting with an earlier state, which define specific relationships between built types and urban form. The focus is on the alterations, deformations and fractures into which the design interventions fit themselves. The plan for the ancient centre of Pesaro is actually made up of a set of strategic urban projects that place the architectural project at the centre of the construction and management of the city: “For the first time – we believe – the architectural project (albeit divided into various phases: from the block plan to the execution drawing) is understood as a necessary episode in the public administration of the city, subject to development by the public authorities, and at the same time open to input from external technicians, like any other city development tool.”<sup>23</sup>.

The gaze oriented by attention to the stratification of the city, of fabrics and of open and public spaces, committed to seizing the transformations and arrangements within the inhabited space, continues, later, in a different cultural context with André Corboz’s thoughts on the territorial palimpsest<sup>24</sup>, a metaphor that portrays the city as process of accumulation and erasure. The *Atlas du territoire genevois*<sup>25</sup> uses a comparison of the Napoleonic cadastre with subsequent ones as the basis for identifying three modes through which the city transforms: permanence, when the *tracé* remains identical to the previous one; persistence, when the urban element, albeit entirely altered, is still perceivable and capable of guiding the transformation; and disappearances that are later replaced by different artefacts and leave almost no trace. Research inspired by Corboz’s essay considers, as in the case of the processual reading of the type, the evolving territory, bringing its historical depth to the fore, and explores “la dimension temporelle de l’espace géographique et de son devenir”.<sup>26</sup> The present is the set of clues left behind by the countless stories preserved in the territorial palimpsest, it is their “selective accumulation”.

## Types and biopolitics

In the 18th century, the use of the term “type” was specified as an *outil* of the natural sciences: starting with the systematic classification of plants and animals proposed by Linnaeus, the essence of a set of objects or people. In Durand’s *Recueil*<sup>27</sup>, the collected types form a catalogue of examples abstracted from their context and their processual formation. As such, the type is proposed as a synchronic generative