

MORPHOLOGICAL TERRITORY AS A CONCEPT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE COMPOSITE CITY: LEARNING FROM CONTEMPORARY STRUCTURES, TEXTURES AND CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The contemporary city morphologies combine a variety of contradictions arising from the multiplicity and complexity of their processes and forms of materialization. Fragmentation, discontinuity and heterogeneity illustrate the multiple ways in which contemporary society interacts with its physical territory. Thus, composite city arises from the physical embodiment of the living spaces and lifestyles of its complex *civitas*. So, if present society is often taken as invisible (Innerarity, 2004) the territory of its materialization will obviously be assumed as unintelligible.

Given the above reasons, there are neither grand narratives nor simple schemes of rationalization that can encompass the complexity and diversity of the present-day urban condition. However relying on the absence of order and repeatedly making the apology of the crisis – of form, structure and boundaries – disclose one's difficulty in identifying strategies to overcome a blockage. Therefore, we expect to contribute to the renewal of the conceptual and theoretical support by suggesting a new methodological framework for learning from the composite city which implies a cognitive strategy based on observation-interpretation-description and recognizes, from a multitude of variations, the essential principles that organize urban form and enable to identify intelligible morphological units, or fragments.

The composite city complex reality and the meaning and cognitive value of these perceptive fragments led us back to Simmel (1913) when reflecting on the recognition of a landscape while accepting that "Nature is not composed by pieces": "for there to be a landscape, our consciousness has to acquire a wholeness, a unity, over and above its component elements, without being tied to their specificity or mechanistically composed of them". Thus, this framework relies, firstly, on a specific 'way of looking' at the composite materials of urbanization assuming that, through observation, one can 'capture' the 'boundaries' of the different perceptual morphological units. Secondly, focusing on these *morphological territories* (Font, 2004), it operates the criteria implied in three essential observation apparatus: *Structure* and *Texture* – recognizing the intrinsic values of their configuration – and *Context* – identifying the extrinsic values of its own territorial and relational framework that determine its concrete materialization.

By making legible and intelligible its fragments and the ways they relate we expect to present a possible way of representing and understanding the contemporary composite city reality.

Keywords: Fragmented City, Morphological territory, Structure, Texture, Context

1. ON THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

The contemporary city is the result of a process of transformation that took place in the last two centuries and culminates with the assumption of a new urban dimension of territorial range concomitant with the new, complex and plural condition of its society.

The phenomenon of city transformation related to the modernization – the permanent revolution which is translated into the process of affirmation of the urban ideal of modernity – acknowledges successive and overlapping dynamics of city expansion and concentration, of ‘explosion’ and ‘implosion’, that characterize at once feelings of freedom and of fear of its dissolution. The increase in infrastructure and mobility conditions, which led, first, to the exponential intensification of urban growth, beginning in the nineteenth century, and, secondly, at the turn of the twentieth century, the exploitation of electric power, the development of the telephone, the invention and diffusion of the automobile, with the need to rethink the road and street networks, paved the way for radical new changes (Choay, 1998). However, it is later with the technological revolution of the 1950s that three macro processes related to each other – globalization, informationalization and widespread urban diffusion – seem to converge to the disappearance of the city as a specific (and Known) form of relationship between the territory and the society (Borja; Castells, 1997).

Since then, urbanization disperses irreversibly over the territory assuming as a premise of its materiality its paradoxical condition, i.e., the coexistence of affinities and contradictions arising from the multiplicity and complexity of different processes of materialization that occur side by side, the unusual combinations, the multiplication of discontinuities and fragments and the coexistence in the same place of processes which are explained in different territorial scales: in a word, simultaneousness (which is different from simple accumulation).

The idea of the city as an organism and as a discrete element, confined by its real or perceived boundaries, is lost. Thus, for those who still keep as reference the simple duality that existed before – the city and the countryside – the extensive and fragmented urbanization is a kind of a double metamorphosis of equations and variables that results illegible in its contents. For those, the modern utopia that was built not only of ideology, but also of an urban movement that finds its apotheosis in the extensive urban territories of contemporaneity is accepted as the great paradigm of dreams and shattered ideals. In this scenario, the efforts to recognize and the attempts to understand the urban expansion and especially the dispersion of occupation coexist paradoxically with the permanent return to an idea of a limited and concentrated city that no longer exists.

There seems to be a general consensus on the diversity of contradictions arising from the multiplicity and complexity of the processes and forms of materialization of the contemporary composite city. However, this does not mean that it is always taken into account that fragmentation, discontinuity and heterogeneity illustrate, in fact, a highly formalized and rational framework of procedures that results from the multiple ways through which contemporary society occupies its territory. Thus, being contemporary society taken as invisible (Innerarity, 2004), because it results from a complex process in which mobility, volatility, fragmentation and mergers converge, the territory of its materialization is generally and naturally understood as unintelligible. In fact, if we consent, before the evidences, that social reality acquired a diffuse fluidity (Innerarity, 2001), a redundant expression that emphasizes the immeasurable, unstable and paradoxical situation of hypermodern society (Ascher, 2005), we need to accept, as a consequence, that this framework materializes in a similar manner in the

territory.

2. ON THE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF URBAN FORM

In the absence of grand narratives or simple schemes of rationalization capable of embracing the complexity and diversity of the present-day urban condition, it is common to invoke the lack of order and make the apology of the crisis – the crisis of form, structure and boundaries – disclosing the difficulty in overcoming an epistemological blockage. A blockage that relies on the inability to recognize, interpret and act upon the existing urban reality through a conceptual and analytical framework experienced and consensual for the urban models of the traditional, canonical and confined city, but clearly unsuitable for the contemporary multiperspective, policontextual and composite circumstances that indeed characterize it.

If the contemporary urban reality or its appropriate representation – the ‘way of looking’ – is built from the concepts that unravel it and the known analysis tools don’t serve to understand it (and, of course, to act upon it), we intend to propose the renewal of the conceptual and theoretical methodological support that determines the way we perceive and interpret the contemporary city. As a result, although the ‘way of looking’ is inherent to the representation of the ‘looked at object’ the same reference system that guides the observation can, however, respond to different settings and scales provided that the principles underlying its practical implementation change and adapt in the presence of different circumstances.

Therefore, it is essential to contribute to the definition of a new methodological framework for interpretation, i.e., to propose an instrumental ‘way of looking’, operating across multiple scales and integrating urban diversity and the multiple territories of its materialization. Its creation and implementation should however assume, first and foremost, that to understand the contemporary urban reality the crucial problem is to organize the principle of knowledge and therefore it is inevitable to reorganize our mental system to re-learn how to learn (Morin, 1977). So the ‘way of looking’ that we seek to propose as a reorganized framework for understanding is, such as mapping in the words of Cosgrove, “in one way or another to take the measure of a world, and more than merely take it, to figure the measure so taken in such a way that it may be communicated between people, places or times” (Cosgrove, 1999). By seeking to establish a new form of ‘measuring a world’, given the interpretive and also purposeful sense to which refers the previous expression (and thus not aiming for any universalizing intent) we found ourselves inevitably faced with the need to understand the different levels of the problem that lies behind the materialization of contemporary territory of urbanization.

First of all, given that the understanding arises from the encounter with the form, Goeth would say, Urban Morphology as a concrete framework for the apprehension of materiality is determined, for this reason, as the scope of our experimentation, bearing in mind a comprehensive approach that might be useful to any concrete urban context. Then, Sieverts (2003) enabled us to confirm the point of departure by establishing that legibility and intelligibility are fundamental conditions for building an identity. In fact, to answer to the purpose set out – to re-learn how to learn the territory of contemporary urbanization – it was implicit that to observe and describe the present-day multiple morphological configurations it was to accept, as Sieverts, that legibility and intelligibility of urban form are fundamental to the construction of its identity and, consequently, of its representation.

In this process of intellection of form, finding a way to simplify the ‘real’ (Viganò, 1999), to capture with accuracy the essential elements for its characterization (Marti, 1993) and hence to

determine its permanent qualities, arises from the affinity with Goethe's morphological project: it is not about the indeterminate reduction of multiplicity to unity, but, on the concrete ground of singular forms not lose sight of the reduction, daring to determine it each time (Molder, 1993). As such to figure out a lot in one and get to see the one in a lot (Molder, 1993) consists of thinking in its various manifestations and finding, given the multitude of variations, the essential principles that organize it.

We then start from the observation of the existing urbanization but we do not limit ourselves to the description of the spatial configuration of the enlarged territory, we seek rather to understand the gaps in knowledge, the curious absence of morphological contributions (Mangin, 2004) and, based on this, we expect to recognize the different composite materials comprising the contemporary city territory. Therefore, we propose to move towards an analysis sustained on the essential characteristics of form and on the identification of the morphological composites – the *morphological territories* (Font et al, 1999; Font (ed.), 2004) – which are likely to be perceived and autonomized although being juxtaposed and arising from the combination of a multiplicity of elements.

This intention implies to consider the territory of urbanization in its fullness, integrating both the emerging morphologies of diffuse or disperse settlement and the result of the processes of densification, regeneration or conversion of canonical city. By doing so we reject a priori partition (that might enclose the terms of analysis and influence the direction and the outcomes) and advocate that the principles that guide the present methodological project are based on a systemic and comprehensive understanding of the urbanized territory.

2.1. The morphological territory

The systemic view of the contemporary city urbanized territory and the system, as a concept that reflects the idea of a combination of strongly related and interdependent parts, ensure the necessary conditions to operationalize an understanding that is based on the recognition of a whole or a unit – a *morphological territory* –, whose consistency is beyond the simple sum of the components of any group of similar elements, as a part of a wider whole. For this reason, the cognitive importance of the *morphological territory* in a systemic framework is based on its ability to build a speculative support that allows us to confirm “a limit, a way of being circumscribed by a field of momentary or permanent vision” (Simmel, 1913). In fact, the system establishes the basic conditions to define “a self-contained perception intuited as a self-sufficient unity, which is nevertheless intermeshed with an infinite expansiveness and a continual flux” (Simmel, 1913).

The possibility of perceiving a landscape as a segment of Nature, as Simmel points out, or the demarcation of a morphological unit from the observation of the territory of urbanization, in what matters the present proposal, corresponds, in fact, to the idea of making visible a fragment – a composite – that is perceived both as a ‘wholeness’ and as a part of a larger, continuous and complex ‘whole’. As the landscape is subjected to Nature, also *morphological territory* is subordinated to its territorial context. Therefore, by establishing a conformity between the perception of a ‘whole’ and the identification of a *morphological territory* (condition that is maintained regardless of the specific scale of observation) we reaffirm that the perception of a system corresponds to the recognition of any autonomous morphological composite, which accepts, paradoxically, its dependence on the material and immaterial properties of the broader urban context in which it operates.

2.2. The 'way of looking'

The recognition of a *morphological territory* as an intelligible part of the composite city depends, as mentioned above, on a specific 'way of looking' and, therefore, considers the basic principle that establishes, firstly, that observation is not free of prejudice and, secondly, that the analysis implies choices and interpretations.

The process of observation, interpretation and description of the existing city materializes itself a cognitive strategy, i.e., a way of understanding or of producing meaning, which implies the previous definition of concepts and the early selection of tools to achieve a particular purpose. In short, the observation requires an observer. The observer, in turn, embodies a specific point of view or the 'rules' that guide the contemplation and, for that reason, maintains an identical 'behavior' for each composite of reality that is circumscribed from the urbanized territory, identifying the similarities and distinguishing the differences that characterize it.

Thereby, it becomes possible to identify an intelligible unit – a *morphological territory* – that corresponds to the operationalization of a pre-established 'point of view' implemented by a given 'observer', who, by observing and describing the existing reality, decomposes its complex dimension, simplifying it through a convenient and self-interested selection that captures the 'boundaries' of the different perceptual morphological units.

3. ON THE INTERPRETATIVE MATRIX OF URBAN FORM

The acknowledgement of the systemic dimension of the existing urban reality and the need to define a specific point of view, the conditions under which the observation is produced, enables us to understand, firstly, the premises to identify consistent and relevant morphological units, recognizable by the specific characteristics of a materiality that is beyond the strict identification of its components. Now, and for a proper understanding of these units we propose a second operation of decomposition, which identifies the essential values of the form for their characterization.

The speculative nature of the cognitive strategy, that directs the observation prior to the empirical experience, necessarily follows from the theorization of a problem in light of the problematization of a topic. So, according to the assumptions we have adduced so far, it seems quite clear that selecting the devices or apparatus that should guide the observation requires that we begin by dissecting materials essential to the understanding of the variants and invariants of the form, the apparent and the intrinsic values, so that, later, being identified and validated the essential attributes, we may return again to the materials or the morphological composites, describing them as a relevant and instrumental 'way of looking'.

Thus, in light of previous empirical experiences and reflections arising from the various readings over the territory, we consider that the morphological description and the critical observation that allow to recognize and reflect on the principles that determine the unity and the essence of the form of urban materials, must rest and proceed from an interpretative framework that is based on two main concepts – *Structure* and *Texture*. *Structure* and *Texture* are two recognizable and understandable criteria that, by corresponding to general propositions underlying forms of urban physical world – the permanent qualities –, establish a fundamental 'filter' from which we can understand, characterize and compare the multiple compositions of variables that constitute and distinguish the *morphological territories*.

However, it seems clear that describing the qualities of the *morphological territories*

presupposes also to understand the affinities between the different morphological units incorporating the urban relational dimension in the analysis of form. We refer to the attributes that go beyond the strict characteristics of each morphological unit and while being external to it are, paradoxically, inherent to the characterization of its form, contextualizing it in a particular territorial reality.

In short, we consider that the effective legibility and, particularly, the intelligibility of the complex and composite morphologies of urbanization comply with the operationalization of the criteria implied in three observation apparatus that enable the recognition of the essential values of urban form: *Structure* and *Texture* – recognizing the intrinsic values of its configuration – and *Context* – acknowledging the extrinsic values, specific of its own territorial and relational framework, which however, influence their materialization.

3.1. The observation apparatus

The use of the term apparatus is based on the idea of creating an operational synthesis able to promote or highlight certain characteristics arising from the relationship that is established between the observed reality and the observer who observes it. We recognize and emphasize its methodological function considering it as a fundamental condition for a specific reflection on the real city morphology.

Thus, the observation apparatus allows us to identify and operationalize the concepts and the ‘rules’ that guide the ‘way of looking’, producing an interpreted reality and thereby contributing to the recognition of the components that, combined with coherent epistemological connections, result in the definition of what we want to be answered. The questions that stimulate and support the process of knowledge acquisition are neither exempt nor innocuous; they rather evidence assumptions and previous conjectures. The apparatus, naturally configured out of them, embodies a unique approach, assuming and, above all, showing that the comprehension of experienced reality and its representation rely on the use of an informed descriptor and, as such, a competent device to make a ‘translation’ founded on the observation and considering a previously formulated hypothesis.

Indeed, from the moment that we clarify the requirements for its operationalization, the observation apparatus starts working as a specific activator device of a certain understanding, allowing a selection between multiple experiences and therefore intensifying the dialogue between what is experienced and what is recognized.

3.2. Structure

Structure refers to events of space organization, in the words of Távora (1962), and intends to “highlight, of the object, not its individual physical consistency, but its analyzability, its power to be decomposed into relations” as Eco (1962) would say. Thus, the *Structure* observation apparatus recognizes the qualities of form that identify, differentiate, order, organize, determine, persist and ensure a sense of renewal. That is, those qualities concerning with the coordination and coherence of the form of a particular unit but also those that are also associated with the production of effects of attractiveness or polarization on the surrounding territory.

Structure focuses, effectively, in two fundamental areas of understanding: firstly, concentrates in the essential relations that determine the composition or the parts of an unit mode of organization, i.e., the ‘skeleton’ or the structure itself, which determines, articulates and

organizes; secondly, relates to the understanding of the dynamic potential, which determines the ability to produce or not transformation effects, i.e., the ability to act on or influence its own transformation and the transformation of the territory of urbanization.

By understanding the dimensions of characterization that both fix and dynamize a particular way of organization – structuring axes, lines, grids or networks – the interpretation considering *Structure* shows its importance as a criterion of intelligibility of the territory and, for this reason, its value as a mechanism for structuring the various models of urbanization, conditioning and organizing the layout and the configuration of the more complex morphological units. Besides those, the points, the poles, the nuclei, the centralities or the nodes, understood also as accesses, links, articulations and intersections, polarize the network and are characterized by the exceptionality of the functions that they gather or by the multiplicity of activities available in scenarios of spatial convergence – agglomeration or centralization –, are also important conditions to measure the ability of urban structuring of a particular morphological unit.

3.3. Texture

Texture sets out a space for the interpretation of form that meets the description of the specific characteristics of materiality. In its most abstract and also wider sense, *Texture* is defined as the material appearance of the continuous ‘surface’ that combines all the components and modes of composition – a coating flexible and adaptable to multiple variations of form –, which characterizes the various parts of a previously defined territorial continuum. In its strictest sense, *Texture* refers to an idea of cohesion that is revealed through a specific formal consistency and that is specific to a coherent and consistent morphological unit and, as such, presents a particular regularity and tends to homogeneity.

An observation that focuses on the concrete reality which is associated under the first understanding – the widest – allows naturally to decompose and bound the units that correspond to the second – the strictest –, the one that interests, particularly, to the operationalization of the present methodological proposal. So, the interpretation of *Texture* as an observation apparatus requires us to consider the combined physical characteristics that, together, produce a particular composition or a correlative configuration, characteristic of a specific time and scale in which the observation is carried out.

Thus, we can sum up that *Texture* should be analysed taking into account two key operations for the morphological description of the territory of urbanization. The first is the recognition of formal continuities that allow to delimit and to distinguish each different composite or *morphological territory*. The second refers to the description of the combined physical attributes, in order to clarify the factors of compliance or regularity that justify the delimitation of a morphological composition perceived as a unit and that characterize it.

3.4. Context

The *Context* – the third observation device that we propose – reflects on the specificities and the effects of the web of interactions that qualify and affect the materialization of urban morphologies. It invokes simultaneously different scales of interpretation considering the issues that relate to the conditions of intensification or, inversely, of decreasing of contacts, meeting the consequences produced by physical and especially relational proximity or distance. Thus, we can say that the *Context* verifies the conditions of convergence or of divergence and, hence, of the degree of cohesion or of disarticulation between the different *morphological territories*,

grounded on the valuation of physical contiguity or distance and, above all, on connectedness or isolation.

In fact, the relational dimension, as a set of conditions that allow understanding an individual composite in relation to a territory and the society that occupies it, is an inherent condition in any urban setting and in any period of history. It enhances the establishment of various bonds among those that inhabit a given space, and hence those which, together, intensify a particular spatial experience. However, as the traditional city incorporated all its relational components in a single confined space and, for this reason, the relational dimension based on spatial proximity constituted an implicit and not distinctive issue, this component was undervalued as a criterion for interpretation in the past. Nowadays, regardless of physical distance, relational proximity is indeed a decisive factor for the intensity of interactions and consequently represents an important condition for the evaluation of the urban form and the morphologies that result from the territorialization of urbanization.

By reflecting on the nexus of relations, the *Context* introduces, then, a different vision about the reticulated dimension of the contemporary composite city, recognizing the dynamic that channels and facilitates interactions and exchanges between the multiple points of an urban network. So if the *Structure* captures the multidimensional reality of physical networks, the *Context* aims to capture the intensities that cross and model the reticulated space.

3.5. The interpretative matrix

Structure, *Texture* and *Context* correspond, therefore, to the observation apparatus that guide the interpretation and description of the composite city *morphological territories*, considering three interdependent levels of abstraction able to be understood analytically in an autonomous way. However, this operation of simplification that enables to 'manipulate' reality in order to make it understandable admits, paradoxically, the possibility of overlapping and accepts that the cognitive values, distinguished by each observation apparatus, can change the relative position or rank, depending on the scale of interpretation.

The proposed methodological process – the *interpretative matrix* or the 'way of looking' – incorporates essential issues of a way of thinking about the current urban form, accepting a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to multiple possible combinations but also to the intricate relations between different composites. However the virtue of the proposed methodological tool reveals, paradoxically, its assumed flaw: the inability to establish with a universalizing rigor neither the limits of the characterization of the composite nor the edges of its performance on its environment.

The mediation that the matrix realizes should thus be invented and reinvented for each use, since the methodological system proposed is generalizable only in the principles or in the propositions that organize the correspondence between the three essential observation devices and assumes, as a prerequisite for a specific interpretation, the definition of a specific 'observer' and the preconceptions that determine his cognitive experience.

4. ON THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we recognize as advantages of the proposed methodological framework the conditions that determine, on the one hand, that the observation apparatus admit a multiplicity of relations, reveal and accept the inaccuracy of the empirical appropriations and assume the uncertainty of the rationalized deductions; on the other hand, the definition of a 'way of looking'

appealing to the concept of system as a conceptual base of support ensures that the complexity and the fluidity that stand out as characteristics of contemporary reality are also transformed into implicit and fundamental assumptions of its interpretation. In fact, if the system is complex, intricate and unstable, but ensures the principles of its organization, and is unifying but highlights the elements that constitute it, then the systemic thinking reproduces or imitates reality of contemporary urbanization and, therefore, contributes to disclose the principles of its representation.

Thus, while the systemic view contributes to a strategy of production of intelligibility that admits the fluidity of information and the multiplicity of levels of fragmentation, the *Context*, in turn, provides a dimension of understanding that allows correlating the different scales of interpretation of any morphological system at any scale of interpretation. The proposed methodology integrates the richness of associations, connections and interdependencies of the hypertextual contemporary city without reducing the quality or the complexity of the relevant information derived from the observation of the intrinsic characteristics of the form – the *Structure* and the *Texture* – of each morphological unit. Allowing systemically to delimit *morphological territories* and to relate the threefold nature of the values of form, it permits to go beyond the reductionist visions, which only see the elements or distinguish in a tight way large partitions of urbanization based on the chronology of its implementation, but also the holistic views that tend to only see the ‘whole’.

The *morphological territory* as a concept for understanding the composite city assumes an adjustable and inclusive condition, which accepts the diversity of appropriations and the variety of corresponding representations. Concurrently, the *interpretative matrix* corresponds to a process of knowledge that, assuming initially a descriptive nature, allows establishing simultaneously the criteria of its practical operationalization. In fact, if describing materializes itself a cognitive strategy or a way of producing meaning, when we determine the conditions under which an observation is produced and accept the intended points of view that select and combine relevant materials and decide the related frames of intelligibility, we guarantee, simultaneously, an approach that underlies the creative thinking and the project as a mediator of a transformation.

The matrix of interpretation is therefore a tool to design the composite city, a learning opportunity for each reality that is known and which is intended to transform. We recognize, therefore, the importance of the *morphological territory* as concept for deciphering, for explaining, for intervening and hence for restructuring or producing new morphologies in the urbanized territory.

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