



## Reflections of an Italophile urban morphologist

Ivor Samuels

Urban Morphology Research Group, School of Geography, University of Birmingham

E-mail: [ivor.samuels@googlemail.com](mailto:ivor.samuels@googlemail.com)

### Riflessioni di un morfologo urbano italofilo

*Alla recente uscita di un libro dedicato a Jeremy Whitehand (Oliveira 2018), gli otto autori hanno presentato il lavoro ad un pubblico di circa quaranta persone alla Scuola di Geografia e Scienze Ambientali dell'Università di Birmingham. Durante la mia presentazione ho iniziato a sospettare che stessi parlando a un pubblico composto interamente da geografi e chiedendo quanti architetti fossero presenti è emerso che, oltre me, c'erano due studenti post-laurea cinesi e Vitor Oliveira, l'editore portoghese del libro. Ciò non sorprende data la sede e la disciplina della geografia in cui è basato il lavoro di Whitehand, ma Oliveira ha osservato che un'assemblea di quelli interessati alla morfologia urbana in Portogallo includerebbe la maggioranza degli architetti.*

*Questo sarebbe anche il caso dell'Italia dove chi scrive, un architetto, scoprì per la prima volta la morfologia urbana, perché per quanto riguarda la forma urbana - come la maggior parte degli architetti formati in Gran Bretagna negli anni '60 - il mio approccio era basato esclusivamente sul lavoro di Gordon Cullen e la Townscape School. Ciò nonostante la Architectural Association era un'istituzione di avanguardia nella quale i tre anni centrali erano dedicati alla progettazione nel contesto di un villaggio, di un borgo e di una città. Vale la pena notare che i nostri insegnanti, inclusi due notevoli architetti come Arthur Korn e Otto Koenigsberger, erano profughi tedeschi dei nazisti come MRG Conzen. Attraverso una formazione successiva come urbanista, sono passato al lavoro di Lynch, ma il nostro unico contatto con i geografi in quel corso è stato attraverso le loro lezioni su montagne, laghi e fiumi e, occasionalmente, sul clima.*

*Solo in seguito, lavorando come architetto in Italia, mi sono reso conto di altri approcci alla forma urbana formulati da architetti di cui non ero a conoscenza, che stavano indagando sistematicamente sui tipi urbani. Tra questi vi era il lavoro di Muratori che fu marginalizzato in quel periodo, ma anche il lavoro intrapreso a Bologna da Cervellati negli anni '70. Tuttavia i miei contatti professionali a Milano non ne erano a conoscenza, né erano interessati al lavoro svolto in altri luoghi. Ad esempio mia moglie, laureata in architettura al Politecnico di Milano, non sapeva nulla di quella che sarebbe stata chiamata più tardi scuola Muratoriana e Caniggiana, anche se aveva avuto insegnanti come Ernesto Rogers (uno degli architetti della Torre Velasca) che stavano già sfidando i principi della Modernità.*

*Solo quando sono arrivato al Joint Center for Urban Design del Polytechnic of Oxford, il mio interesse per l'approccio italiano fu ripreso da*

At the recent launch of a book dedicated to Jeremy Whitehand (Oliveira, 2018) the eight authors gave presentations to an audience of around forty at the School of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Birmingham University. During my presentation I began to suspect that I was speaking to an audience consisting entirely of geographers and on asking how many architects were present it emerged that, besides myself, there were two Chinese postgraduate students and Vitor Oliveira, the Portuguese editor of the book. This is not surprising given the venue and the discipline of geography in which Whitehand's work is based, but Oliveira observed that a gathering of those interested in urban morphology in Portugal would include a majority of architects. This would also be the case in Italy where this author, an architect, first discovered urban morphology, because as far as urban form was concerned, – like most architects trained in Britain in the 1960s my approach was based exclusively on the work of Gordon Cullen and the Townscape School. This was despite the Architectural Association being an avant garde institution where the three middle years were devoted to designing within the context of a village, a town and a city respectively. It is worth noting that our teachers included two remarkable architects Arthur Korn and Otto Koenigsberger who, like MRG Conzen were German refugees from the Nazis. Through later training as a town planner I progressed to the work of Lynch but our only contact with geographers in that course was through their lectures on mountains, lakes and rivers and occasionally the climate.

It was only later working as an architect in Italy that I became aware of other approaches to urban form being formulated by architects I had not been aware of previously who were systematically investigating urban types. These included the work of Muratori who was marginalised at that time, but also the work being undertaken in Bologna by Cervellati in the 1970s. However, based in Milan my professional contacts were not aware of, or not interested, in work being undertaken in other centres. For example my wife, an architecture graduate of Milan Polytechnic, had no knowledge at all of what was to be later called the Muratori – Caniggia School even though she had had teachers such as Ernesto Rogers (one of the architects of the Torre Velasca) who were already challenging the tenets of modernism.

It was not until I came to the Joint Centre for Urban Design at Oxford Polytechnic, as it then was, that my interest in the Italian approach was revived by a number of Latin American postgraduates who had a knowledge of that work which they had been able to access through their language skills. Among the staff we had a cross-section of disciplines which was unusual at that time and still probably is – architects, town planners, landscape architects and one geographer who had trained in Birmingham and who told me there was someone there doing similar things to those Italians. Following this lead and contact with Jeremy Whitehand we organised in Birmingham a seminar on urban morphology in 1982 which for the first time brought together the Italian and British schools of urban morphology. Around the same time Gianfranco Caniggia made a great impact when he spent a month in Oxford in the same year that he went to Seattle, invited by Anne Vernez Moudon later to become the first President of ISUF and who labelled this author as an Italophile.