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Editorial Article

One Urban Form After Another? Urban Morphology and Environmental Design

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Abstract

Urban morphology—the study of urban form—focuses on the spatial structure, morphogenesis, and historical transformation of cities. Methodologies such as *Morpho* provide systematic approaches to assessing urban form by utilising measurable characteristics of streets, plots, buildings, and land uses. However, understanding urban form also requires consideration of its environmental performance. This *Editorial* proposes a morpho-environmental dimension to bring urban morphology and environmental design into closer dialogue. This dimension is needed because urban form shapes environmental conditions and how environmental considerations can inform the evolution of urban form. Drawing on five articles in this issue, the contributors' findings fall into four interconnected directions: relationships between urban form and human wellbeing, the adaptive transformation of existing built fabric, the role of digital technologies in analysing urban environments, and the relationship between morphological configuration and environmental performance. This *Editorial* argues that interdisciplinary research can integrate measurable characteristics of urban form with environmental design considerations. The integration can extend morphological inquiry by positioning environmental performance and related processes within the broader interpretation of urban form. Our takeaways suggest that the continued relevance of urban morphology may depend on redefining its core object of study and more explicitly examining the relationships between urban form and the wider built environment.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary research; environmental dimension; *Morpho*; morphological analysis; morphological dimension; urban morphogenesis

Highlights

- *Morpho* as methodological measurement for urban form elements gives a direction of a dialogue between urban morphology and environmental design.
- Interdisciplinary research can extend urban from and environmental performance into the wider built environment.
- Five articles in this issue of *ABC2* illustrate connections between urban form, human wellbeing, built-fabric transformation, digital technologies, and environmental performance.
- A morpho-environmental dimension was suggested here as interdisciplinary approach. connecting urban morphology with environmental design.

1 Two Disciplines in Dialogue

Urban form is an evolving construct shaped by the interaction of physical, social, environmental, technological, and functional processes over time (Conzen, 1968; Kropf, 2009; Maretto & Scardigno, 2016; Whitehand, 1992). Its complexity has made the city an object of inquiry between multiple disciplines, each contributing distinct directions on how urban forms are produced, structured, experienced, and transformed (Moudon, 1997). In this sense, urban form can be understood as a layered spatial construct in which processes and disciplinary approaches intersect, overlap, and leave their imprint on the city. The phrase “one urban form after another” used here captures the successive, overlapping, and interacting layers where urban form is produced, interpreted, and transformed across disciplines and over time.

Urban morphology, the study of urban form, has long provided an important lens for understanding cities and their morphogenesis (Chen et al., 2025; Kropf, 2009; Oliveira & Porta, 2025). Its foundations have been developed by examining streets, plots, buildings, and land uses, as well as the factors that shape their configuration across multiple historical and future time periods (Conzen, 1968; Gauthiez, 2004). These approaches have enabled researchers to interpret cities as structured and evolving spatial systems (AlSadaty, 2023; Whitehand, 1992; Wu & Cheng, 2019).

Urban morphology has developed through Italian, British, and French schools, each offering distinctive ways of understanding how cities form and change (Gauthiez, 2004). The Italian school, particularly the Muratorian tradition, emphasises building typology, historical continuity, and the relationship between urban form and design (Maretto & Scardigno, 2016). The British, or Conzenian, school focuses on the historico-geographical analysis of town planning and morphological regions (Pinho & Oliveira, 2009). French school have contributed a distinctive approach to the historical formation and transformation of urban structure (Chiaradia, 2019). Research on urban morphology discusses comparative approaches, methods, and tools (Oliveira & Porta, 2025). Although these traditions differ in their theoretical foundations and analytical techniques, they overlap and continue to evolve through interdisciplinary exchange. These schools have enriched the study of urban form. However, contemporary urban contexts are increasingly diverse (Elshater, Abusaada, Tarek, & Afifi, 2022), while the growing emphasis on environmental performance encourages further consideration of how established approaches can be connected and extended to address these changing conditions.

Environmental design addresses the relationship between the built environment and its environmental conditions (Lou, 2019; Zhu, 2026). It considers how buildings, open spaces, materials, vegetation, orientation, density, and spatial configuration influence thermal comfort, energy use, microclimate, ecological performance, and human experience. Increasingly, environmental design requires understanding urban form as a fundamental determinant of environmental performance (Elshater, Abusaada, Alfiky, et al., 2022; Pansare & Salama, 2023; Rahimian & Salama, 2026; Salama, 2019).

Interdisciplinary research in urban morphology is not entirely new. The field has expanded beyond describing physical form to consider the processes, systems, organisations, and actors that shape cities (Noaime & Alwaer, 2026). As Moudon (1997) explains, urban morphology examines the physical configuration of streets, plots, buildings, and blocks, as well as how urban form evolves over time. More recently, morphological inquiry has increasingly engaged with issues such as walkability, thermal comfort, microclimate, and sustainable development (Ju et al., 2026; Marey, Zou, Goubran, Wang, & Gaur, 2025; Najjar, Major, Al-Amadi, & Ali, 2025). Much research focuses on the effects of urban morphogenesis on environmental considerations (Abdelkhalik, Elshater, Afifi, & ElBardisy, 2026a; Augusto et al., 2024; Megahed, Elshater, Elrefaie, & Afifi, 2025; Xu, Yang, Zheng, & Li, 2024; Yelixiati, Tong, Luo, & Chen, 2024; Zeng et al., 2025).

Drawing on converging disciplines, this *Editorial* discusses the relationship between environmental design and urban morphology in analysing city structure. This relationship raises a question:

RQ1: Can interdisciplinary research help integrate urban morphology and environmental design, in which urban morphogenesis shapes environmental performance and environmental considerations inform the evolution of urban form?

This question reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary cities, where urban form interacts with buildings, infrastructure, environmental conditions, technological systems, and human activities. Urban transformation is consequently shaped by changes in spatial configuration, building adaptation, mobility, digital technologies, social practices, and environmental demands. Addressing these interactions requires an interdisciplinary approach that addresses the mutual influences between urban form and environmental performance. This *Editorial* positions environmental conditions as integral components of morphological analysis, recognising their role in shaping and explaining urban form performance.

One particularly important direction for this extension is the relationship between urban form and the environment. Urban form does not exist independently of environmental processes (Oliveira, 2013). The configuration of streets, buildings, blocks, open spaces, vegetation, and urban density influences—and is influenced by—microclimatic conditions, energy flows, ecological processes, resource consumption, and exposure to environmental risks. As such, urban morphogenesis can be interpreted and transformed alongside intersecting processes that different disciplines investigate in different ways.

2 In This Issue of *ABC2*

The contributions in the 6th issue of the 2026 volume of *ABC2: Journal of Architecture, Building, Construction, and Cities* provide an opportunity to reflect on this emerging direction. They address diverse subjects and operate across different scales. Their themes include urban transformation, public health, quality of life, building adaptation, digital infrastructure, and environmental conditions. These contributions illustrate the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary urban research. In this sense, questions that have traditionally received less attention in interdisciplinary research in urban morphology and environmental studies can open new research directions.

The first direction concerns the relationship between urban form and human wellbeing (Seyok, Salama, & McIntyre, 2026). Research linking urban transformation with public health shows that changes in cities' physical structure can have implications beyond spatial configuration. Similarly, studies of quality of urban life in post-industrial cities highlight the importance of understanding how users experience and interpret urban environments. This direction shows how morphological analysis can connect cities' physical characteristics with the conditions of everyday life. They also provide a basis for examining the relationships between spatial structures and the conditions they create for everyday life.

A second direction concerns the relationship between urban form and transformation. Contemporary cities are increasingly characterised by adaptation rather than complete replacement. Buildings are converted, neighbourhoods are redeveloped, plots are subdivided or consolidated, and existing urban tissues accommodate new uses and changing demands (Abdelkhalik, Elshater, Afifi, & ElBardisy, 2026b; Mlote, Yalçınkaya, & Ortner, 2026). Studying building conversion and avoided carbon emissions highlights the importance of understanding transformation as a process involving existing built fabric. This raises an important morphological question: how can the capacity of urban form and buildings to adapt be incorporated more explicitly into the study of urban change?

A third direction emerges from the increasing role of digital technologies in the built environment. Machine learning, geographic information systems, remote sensing, Internet of Things technologies, computational modelling, and other forms of digital analysis are changing the observation and interpretation of the urban form (Okonta & Bamgbose, 2026). These technologies create opportunities to analyse urban change with greater spatial and temporal resolution and to identify relationships that conventional approaches may struggle to detect. However, the significance of digitalisation for urban

morphology extends beyond the use of new analytical tools. Its deeper contribution may lie in enabling researchers to investigate relationships between urban form and other urban systems in new ways.

A fourth direction concerns the relationship between urban form and environmental performance. Investigating high-rise structures, wind flow, and thermal comfort in this context clearly illustrates this relationship. Building height, density, configuration, and spatial arrangement are fundamental morphological characteristics that also shape environmental conditions within urban spaces (Bagheri Moghadam, Saleem, Animasaun, & Mohammadi, 2026). Such research points towards a broader morphological dimension. Environmental performance therefore becomes an important dimension of morphological analysis, providing a basis for interpreting, evaluating, and transforming urban form. The challenge is to understand environmental conditions as interacting processes that shape the urban form as it performs within its context. This direction positions environmental conditions as integral to morphological analysis, rather than as external variables added to it.

These contributions encourage a shift from viewing urban form as a relatively stable physical outcome towards understanding it as a dynamic process. Morphological analysis can therefore consider how streets, plots, buildings, and blocks are configured, and how these elements change over time, respond to new requirements, and interact with processes occurring at different scales. Digital methods can measure and model urban form. Understanding morphogenesis and its interactions with the context requires interpretation alongside measurement. As such, an interdisciplinary approach that integrates these disciplines is needed.

3 Morpho-Environmental Dimension

Research on urban morphology has introduced *Morpho* as a methodological approach to assessing urban form (Oliveira, 2013; Oliveira & Medeiros, 2016). Grounded in the physical configuration of streets, plots, buildings, and land uses, the methodology translates these elements into measurable characteristics. Oliveira and Medeiros (2016) propose seven measures addressing street accessibility, plot density, building age and alignment, the ratio of building height to street width, street-block dimensions, and building uses. This provides a systematic basis for examining urban form and a starting point for extending morphological analysis to environmental performance.

Building on existing morphological measures, we argue a morpho-environmental dimension could extend urban-form assessment by incorporating indicators of environmental performance and physical condition. These may include urban heat island intensity, sky view factor, surface permeability, vegetation cover, outdoor thermal comfort, and building condition. Such indicators would help analyse the configuration of streets, plots, and buildings as it relates to heat accumulation, water infiltration, microclimatic conditions, and the physical integrity of the built environment. This extension would distinguish the measurable characteristics of urban form from their environmental consequences, providing a basis for investigating the interrelationships between urban morphology and environmental design.

The proposed morpho-environmental dimension seeks to extend urban morphological inquiry by interpreting urban form more deeply in relation to environmental systems, technological developments, and human activities. This dimension retains the discipline's focus on the formation, structure, and transformation of cities while connecting morphological analysis with environmental performance and design considerations. Future research can advance this dialogue by combining quantitative measurement with contextual and qualitative interpretation. Such research can investigate how urban configurations shape environmental conditions and how these conditions, in turn, inform the evolution of urban form.

As such, urban morphology is entering a period of conceptual expansion. Its established focus on urban form remains fundamental. Streets, plots, buildings, blocks, urban tissues, and morphological processes continue to provide the basis of morphological analysis. The opportunity lies in examining

how these elements interact with the wider built environment and how these interactions influence urban form and its performance.

Such an extension could provide a productive space for connecting research on urban form with architecture, building performance, environmental studies, public health, mobility, digital technologies, and social research. It could also encourage researchers to examine the city simultaneously as a physical configuration, a social environment, an ecological system, and a technological infrastructure. In this expanded point of view, morphology becomes a method for reading urban form and a means of understanding relationships across the built environment.

This development also raises methodological challenges. As morphological research becomes increasingly interdisciplinary and data-rich, how can it retain its capacity to recognise place specificity? Large datasets and computational models can identify patterns across cities. A fuller understanding of urban environments also requires attention to historical processes, cultural meanings, and local practices. Situated experiences are equally important. They reveal how urban environments acquire meaning and significance. Future research in the morpho-environmental dimension may therefore benefit from combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, computational analysis and historical interpretation, large-scale datasets and fine-grained readings of urban places. Figure 1 illustrates the morpho-environmental dimension as interdisciplinary.

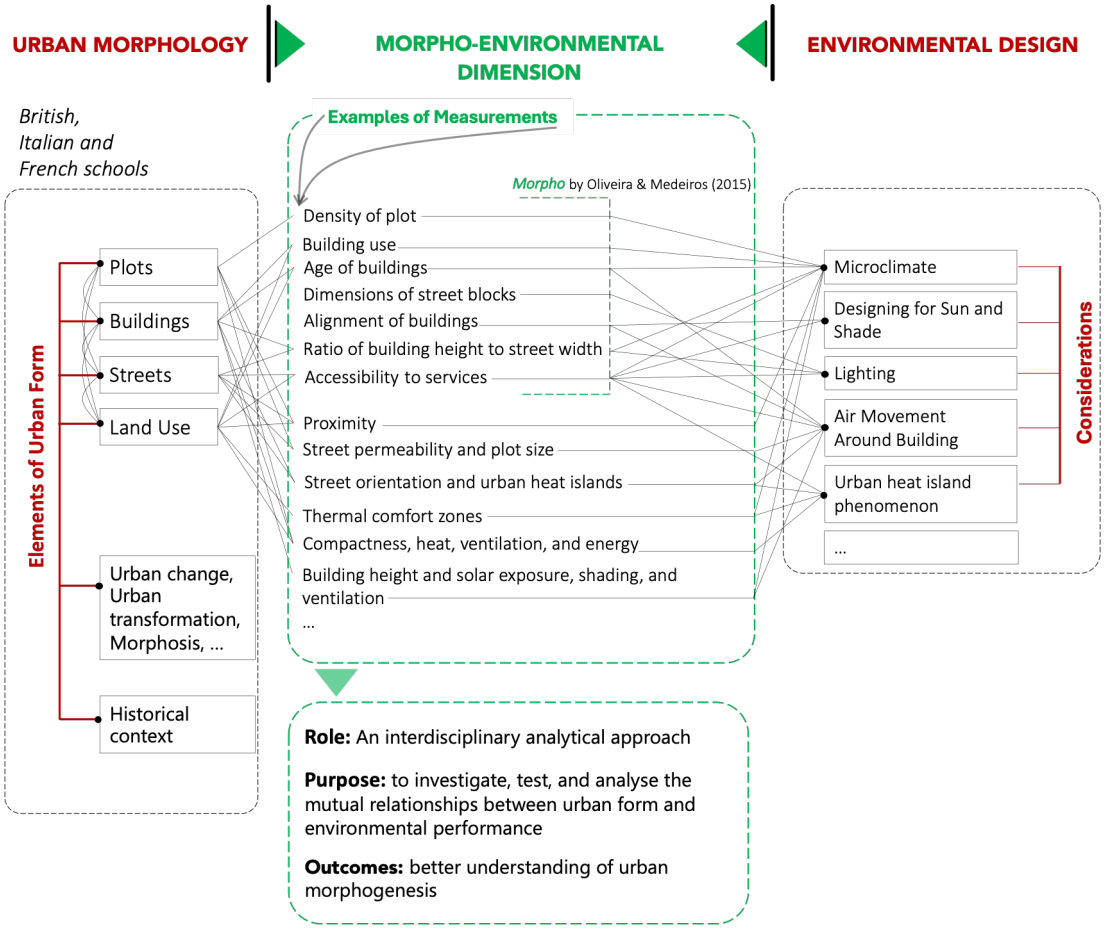


Figure 1. The morpho-environmental dimension as an interdisciplinary approach integrating urban morphology and environmental design (Source: The authors).

4 Advancing the Dialogue

The future development of the morpho-environmental dimension as an interdisciplinary approach may therefore lie in reconsidering the relationships surrounding urban form as an established object of

study. Urban morphogenesis remains at the centre of the inquiry. Its processes can be examined in relation to buildings, infrastructure, environmental systems, technologies, and human activities. This approach preserves the intellectual foundations of urban morphology while allowing the field to respond to the complexity of contemporary urban transformation. By using an interdisciplinary approach, the measurement of urban form characteristics (Morpho) provides a basis for describing and quantifying urban form. Environmental considerations help investigate the changes in urban form in line with the environmental processes and performance.

The morpho-environmental dimension is proposed here as an interdisciplinary analytical approach that connects the morphological characteristics of urban form with environmental performance. It examines how these relationships shape transformations in the built environment. This integration can deepen understanding of urban morphogenesis and its interactions with environmental processes. The challenge for the next generation of urban morphology research is to ask how urban form relates to, influences, and is transformed by the wider built environment. This shift can open new pathways for interdisciplinary research while maintaining urban morphology's distinctive contribution to reading, explaining, and interpreting the spatial structure and transformation of cities. This dimension opens several questions for future research:

- How do different urban forms influence environmental performance across scales?
- How might environmental pressures, such as heat, flooding, resource scarcity, and climate change, reshape existing urban tissues and influence processes of urban morphogenesis?
- How can digital data reveal relationships between urban form, environmental conditions, and urban transformation that conventional approaches may not capture?

Within this interdisciplinary approach, the morpho-environmental dimension focuses on the city's morphogenesis and its interactions with environmental systems and processes. Environmental design provides an important area of engagement within this framework. It highlights environmental performance, resilience, ecological processes, and human experience as dimensions of urban transformation. The emphasis consequently shifts from studying urban form as an isolated object to examining the relationships between form and its environmental context.

Extending urban morphology in this way builds on its core foundations. Urban form exists within a network of relationships that influence how cities evolve. Recognising these relationships can strengthen urban morphology's capacity to interpret contemporary urban transformation and its implications for the wider built environment.

"One urban form after another" highlights the layered and evolving nature of cities. Urban morphogenesis interacts with environmental processes, social practices, technologies, and changing human needs. The proposed morpho-environmental dimension provides a framework for investigating these relationships while retaining urban morphology's focus on the formation, structure, and transformation of urban form. By bringing morphological analysis into dialogue with environmental design, future research can examine how urban form shapes environmental performance and how environmental considerations inform the continued evolution of the built environment.

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