

‘Typical situations’: a symposium on phenomenology and urban morphology, Husserl Archives, Cologne, 12–13 April 2024

The world we live in is manifold, full of surprises, and constantly changing. Fortunately, it also offers a range of recurring and typical situations, thereby enabling us not to get lost, to experience the novel through the lens of the familiar and hence to develop a sense of feeling at home in the world.

The two-day event ‘Typical Situations’ was an inter- and transdisciplinary workshop to foster the dialogue between urban morphology and philosophy. It took place at the Husserl Archives, Cologne, and was collaboratively organised by Daria Belova, Thiemo Breyer, Sylvain Malfroy, Erik Norman Dzwiza-Ohlsen and Urs Primas. The workshop brought together participants from different research cultures and disciplines related to philosophy and architecture, such as phenomenology, anthropology, enactivism, landscape architecture, urban planning and design, architectural history and literature. The interests of the participants covered a wide range of topics and areas, including – but not limited to – phenomenology and philosophical anthropology; applied phenomenology with a focus on orientation, embodiment and ageing; phenomenology of architecture; architectural history; philosophy with a focus on metaphysics and ontology; affordances and landscape

architecture; European avant-garde and architectural typology; terminology in morphology; phenomenological psychology; cognitive science; typological-processual as well as configurational approaches to urban morphology.

The event included several activities that enriched the discussion on the role of typification in human experience and the study of urban form. The various lectures, reflections and discussions were facilitated by a guided tour through a unique place: the Kolumba Museum, Cologne (Figure 1).

The background: phenomenology and urban morphology

As a newly-formed team with a common interest in phenomenology, urban morphology and well-being, in this workshop we aimed to sharpen our understanding of the underlying notion of type as a fundamental structural property of the human life-world from complementary perspectives: urban morphology, architecture and heritage studies on the one hand; philosophy, phenomenology, and research on experience and artefacts on the other. This complementary perspective on type and



Figure 1. Participants of the workshop in the Kolumba Museum.

typical situations and the associated terms, concepts and topics was at the heart of this workshop.

The study of typical situations in buildings and in the city was a central contribution of Italian architects and urban researchers in the second half of the twentieth century. Subsequently, this line of inquiry has influenced the debate and production of architecture and urban design in many places. Meanwhile, the related question of the role of typification in human experience has been underdeveloped within the modern research background of architecture and urban studies in general, and urban morphology in particular. Perhaps surprisingly, such a broader approach seems to be just around the corner: more than a century ago, the philosopher and founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, used the concept of type to denote a fundamental structuring element of human experience. But what is phenomenology?

Phenomenology provides an understanding of the human experience of the world that is methodologically rigorous. In contrast to empirically-oriented disciplines such as ethnology or psychology, it focuses on the structures of lived experience. The phenomenology of architecture offers comprehensive and in-depth investigations of the most fundamental concepts, terms and ideas in architecture, such as space and place, dwelling, building and atmospheres, embodiment, environment and lifeworld, actions, affordances, and of design elements such as corners, edges, and surfaces, or lines, rectangles, and frames, and so on. The experience of the lifeworld, or more precisely, of our home-world, is shaped by elements including perception, movement, perspectivity, orientation, familiarity, historicity, and so forth. The concepts of typicality and habituality are profoundly relevant to urban morphology as they have a strong influence on how we perceive, interact with and inhabit our built environments. Morphology is largely based on the recognition and study of typical elements, forms and patterns, as well as their transformations with reference to types that embody culturally significant characteristics.

On the other side, the tradition of urban form studies, or urban morphology, links architecture, urban history, planning and design through form, uniting a vast and growing community of researchers originally coming from such diverse disciplines as architecture, urban design, geography, history, anthropology, heritage studies and so on. The field encompasses several complementary approaches that are collaborating within the framework of the International Seminar on Urban

Form (ISUF). One of them is rooted in the method of process-based typology founded by the Italian architect Saverio Muratori and has been further developed, among others, by Gianfranco Caniggia. It stands apart from other typological approaches in its emphasis on process and the history of the development of local urban palimpsests, which is particularly attuned to historical and cultural context. Another approach striving to link urban morphology to the phenomenology of human spatial perception is Space Syntax. This configurational approach to the study of urban form has been developed in the 1970s by Bill Hillier, Julienne Hanson and colleagues at the Bartlett, University College London. It examines the relationship between human behaviour and spatial configurations, comparing patterns of activity with patterns of space.

Results and perspectives

As Thiemo Breyer has put it, through the lens of phenomenology we aim to discern the underlying structure of perception and cognition that gives rise to our understanding of the typicality of diverse urban landscapes. Combining phenomenology and urban morphology allows us to go further. The innovative potential of the framing of this workshop lay in the investigation of the complex interplay between human experience, urban environment and the nature of typical situations (Husserl), focusing on how they shape our lived experience and define well-being in urban environments. Types allow for the emergence of legible and coherent urban environments, contributing to the formation of recognisable urban identities and fostering a sense of place and belonging. Habitual patterns of use and behaviour also play a crucial role in sharpening the usability of architectural spaces. Buildings contain elements that facilitate and support habitual activities, such as intuitive wayfinding systems and efficient circulation patterns. The concept of habit extends to the wider urban context, where the layout and configuration of streets and neighbourhoods influence daily routines and the relationship between rationality and experience. By aligning architectural design with habitual behaviour and routine, architects and urban designers may enhance the user's experience of the built environment.

This a newly-constituted team aims to develop research with the overarching objective of fostering inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue. Our goal

is to identify methodologies for shaping urban environments in a manner conducive to enhancing the quality of life, well-being and to multi- and transgenerational transfers of meaning. We will facilitate the dialogue on the transformation of the meaning of place in time, with a view to forming intergenerational environments for the present and future that are respectful of well-being. 'Typical situations' is an accepted umbrella term for our future collaborations.

The workshop identified a range of terminologies that require clarification and several areas of common interest among the participants that can facilitate the integration of disciplines and methodologies. Generally, a productive connectivity of (Husserlian) phenomenology, enactivism and anthropology with morphological methods such as the typological-processual or Space syntax approaches can be established through the concepts of embodied cognition, familiarity, horizon, habit, and lifeworld.

The future plans of the team include several components aimed at exploring and refining key concepts and methodologies, such as a journal special issue or a glossary. To further promote dialogue and expand the group a wide variety of potential academic events is intended, such as workshops, conferences, open lecture series, art schools, design studios, and summer schools, for example on the topic of 'intergenerational environments and meaning transfer'.

The full academic results of the workshop and perspectives will be presented at the ISUF annual conference 2024 and subsequently published.