The Evolution of urban form è un libro ideato per una diffusione larga e spiega chiaramente, in modo molto conciso, le nozioni di tipo edilizio e tessuto urbano nel contesto nord-americano. Illustrato da numerose fotografie, progetti e disegni, il libro è destinato a contribuire ad un cambio di direzione nella pratica della pianificazione e della progettazione urbana negli Stati Uniti. Sheer riconosce nella crescente diffusione dell’approccio new urbanism al design urbano il chiaro sintomo della crisi in corso nella pratica della pianificazione. Nel recente passato la pianificazione si è basata essenzialmente sullo strumento dello zoning, con il risultato che il progetto urbano non ha considerato la forma urbana e il suo significato: questo modo di pianificare ha portato a delle città non progettate, ma conformate dall’esito delle spinte economiche: da questa considerazione nasce l’urgenza necessità di riconsiderare la forma e i tipi edilizi all’interno della pianificazione e della pratica del progetto. Tuttavia Sheer propone nel suo libro una nozione di tipo concepito come la soluzione spaziale ricorrente ad un problema architettonico nell’ambito di un dato contesto sociale e delineata, all’interno di questo concetto, un modo di progettare la città destinato agli architetti “che gestiscono il cambiamento tipologico processuale” (p. 2). Questo aspetto molto particolare della definizione di “tipologia” è concepito per essere usato “come base per la pianificazione fisica” (p. 5). Sheer riconosce nella letteratura anche una diversa definizione di “tipo”, ovvero un tipo coincidente con la funzione dell’edificio. Questa diade antinomica di definizioni tipologiche la porta ad opporre due concetti diversi: tipi formali e tipi d’uso. Per Sheer la prima definizione di “tipo” avviene durante l’Illuminismo come una “legittimazione razionale della forma architettonica” (p. 15): partendo dalla definizione di Quatremère di “tipo”, in contrapposizione al “modello”, fino al funzionalismo razionale di Durand. Anche se la definizione scientifica del “tipo” si trova nella letteratura architettonica all’inizio del XVII sec., i tipi edilizi esistevano molto prima dell’Illuminismo, così come la parola “tipologia”. Il movimento moderno ha improvvisamente respinto la città esistente, quindi le nozioni di tipo e di tessuto urbano. Dopo questa completa amnesia del tipo, un ripensamento sincero si è diffuso a partire dagli anni ‘80, con una nuova attenzione per la città e per il suo processo formativo. In Italia Saverio Muratori e Gianfranco Caniggia, dal 1950, avevano creato una scuola italiana di studi tipologici, sottolineando che i tipi di edifici, come gli organismi viventi, sono in grado di adattarsi alle nuove situazioni sociali. Conzen e i suoi allievi nel Regno Unito, hanno fondato un’altra scuola di morfologia urbana, con nozioni afflatte distanti da quelle espresse dalla scuola italiana. Sheer segue la metafora biologica sull’evoluzione del tipo, anche se - crediamo - all’interno di ogni edificio ci sono delle persone, e ogni edificio è costruito da una o più persone, in modo che gli edifici non seguono solo il processo di evoluzione biologica, ma seguono soprattutto le persone e la loro evoluzione. Il fatto che i progettisti dedicano la maggior parte dei loro sforzi creativi per distinguere i loro progetti è uno dei motivi per cui la nozione di tipo sembra essere stata dimenticata al giorno d’oggi: la troppa individualità degli architetti, ha portato come conseguenza la fine della nozione di tessuto urbano e quindi, della città concepita come un organismo. Il libro considera soprattutto tipi...
The Evolution of urban form is a small book conceived for a wide diffusion and it explains clearly, in a very concise manner, the notion of building type and urban fabric in the North American context. Illustrated by many photographs, plans and drawings, the book is intended to contribute in a change of direction in the practice of urban planning and urban design in the United States. Sheer recognizes that the diffusion of the new urbanism approach to urban design is a clear crisis symptom in the planning practice. In the recent past the planning was mostly based on the zoning instrument and thus accomplished urban design without considering at all the urban form and its meaning: this resulted in cities that are not designed but mostly are the result of economical actions; hence the urgent necessity to reconsider urban form and building types within the planning and design practice. Nevertheless, Sheer proposes in her book a notion of type conceived as the recurring spatial solution to an architectural problem within a given society, and outlines, within this concept, a way for planners to design cities “managing the dynamic typological change” (p. 2). This very particular flavor given to the definition of “typology” is meant to be used “as a basis for physical planning” (p. 5). Sheer also recognizes in the literature a different definition of “type” as coinciding with the building function: this antinomic dyad of typological definitions brings her to oppose two different concepts: formal types and use types. For Sheer the first definition of “type” happens during the Enlightenment as a “rational legitimacy for architectural form” (p. 15): starting from Quatremère’s definition of “type” as opposed to the “model”, all the way to Durand’s rational functionalism. Even though the scientific definition of the “type” is found within architectural literature at the beginning of the XVII cent., the building types existed way before the Enlightenment, as well as the word the “typology”. The Modern movement suddenly rejected the existing city, hence the type and the urban fabric. After that complete amnesia of the type a sincere rethinking happened in the ’80s, including though a new attention to the city and the transformative process. In Italy Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia, since the 1950s, created an Italian school of typological studies, outlining that building types, such as living organisms, can adapt to new social situations. Conzen and his followers in the United Kingdom, founded another school of urban morphology, with nations not at all distant from those expressed by the Italian school. Sheer follows the biological metaphor on the evolution of the type, even though – we believe – inside every building there are persons, and every building is built by one or more persons, so buildings do not follow alone the process of biological evolution but they follow the people and their evolution. The fact that designers dedicate most of their creative efforts to distinguish their projects as coinciding with the building function: this resulted in cities that are not designed but mostly are the result of economical actions; hence the urgent necessity to reconsider urban form and building types within the planning and design practice. Nevertheless, Sheer proposes in her book a notion of type conceived as the recurring spatial solution to an architectural problem within a given society, and outlines, within this concept, a way for planners to design cities “managing the dynamic typological change” (p. 2). 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The fact that designers dedicate most of their creative efforts to distinguish their projects is one of the reasons why the notion of type seems to have been forgotten nowadays: too much individuality in planners and architects brought as a result the end of the notion of urban fabric and thus, of the city conceived as an organism. The book is considering mostly American types, such as office buildings, malls, gas stations and food restaurants, and thus is examining closely many building types that are not considered within European typomorphic literature. So in this sense the volume gives an innovative contribution to the discipline of urban morphology. Sheer recognizes...
in the American chain restaurants buildings an attempt to include branding within architectural form, so that a building originally conceived as a Taco Bell restaurant, persists in its image even after changing its function. The necessity to include branding within commercial buildings in architecture gives us an interesting example of how the meaning of architecture is present within the contemporary society. Various examples of buildings and parts of cities are considered in the book, opening a wide window on the evolution of urban form in the United States: planning cases such as Salt Lake City, Dallas, New Orleans, and Phoenix are considered in depth. The books shows also a method for urban design based on the persistence of physical structures, this analysis can recognize structures and their hierarchic relationships separating and then overlapping different layers of data: objects, buildings, tissues, pre-urban and the site. In some cases the definitions of types given in the book, conceived for a non-specialized reader, are too simplified and end up in a confused vision: e.g. the explanation of the insula and the apartment building follows a long logical jump, mixing row shop houses and insulas and is somehow confusing. (p. 38). Furthermore the book does not show the ground plans of the buildings it analyses, looking mostly at photographs and sometimes at schemes. Sheer is thus adapting the notion of type to the necessities of the American urban condition, which is indeed quite different from the European one, with the precise aim to give useful indications to architects and planners, outlining the strong relationship between typology and urban transformation, between the single building and the form of the city. For this reason the book has gained a wide diffusion and has contributed to a change in direction of the practice of urban design in the United States.

The Greek word Typos, footprint, shows the first meaning of the word typology: i.e. the science of recognizing the animals from their footprints. So the type can be considered as the readable trace of an organism living within a building. Sheer’s notion of type is quite distant from the ahistorical abstraction of the Muratori “a priori” as derived form the Weberian ideal-typus, it does consider instead the function within, shedding some light on the meaning of the type.

Europea, con il preciso scopo di dare indicazioni utili ad architetti e progettisti e delineare una forte relazione tra tipologia e trasformazione urbana, tra il singolo edificio e la forma della città. Per questo motivo il libro ha avuto un’ampia diffusione ed ha contribuito al cambiamento nella direzione della pratica di progettazione urbana negli Stati Uniti. La parola greca Typos, impronta, mostra il primo significato della parola tipologia: cioè la scienza di riconoscere gli animali dalle loro orme. Quindi il tipo può essere considerato come la traccia leggibile di un organismo vivente all’interno di un edificio. La nozione di tipo adottata da Sheer è abbastanza distante dall’astrazione astorica dell’“a priori” Muratoriano (derivato dall’ ideal-typus Weberiano) essa considera invece la funzione all’interno del tipo, facendo anche luce sul significato del tipo.