

# **Towards an operational urban morphology: moving urban morphology from the academy to the studio.**

**Report of the ISUF Task Force on strengthening the connections between urban morphological research and planning practice.**

Ivor Samuels

**To build “better bridges between researchers in urban morphology and practitioners -- planners and urban designers on the front lines of projects that affect urban form.....ISUF needs very thoughtful advice at this juncture, as we continue to struggle with the transition from a small, cosy salon atmosphere to a global group with very eclectic interests yet seeking more effective influence if we are to be relevant.”**

Michael Conzen,2012

**“a discussion of ways in which ISUF could provide leadership in this sphere and drawing up a report with concrete suggestions for action... the report ... would draw up a set of practical proposals in time for Council to adopt and set in motion as soon as possible”.**

Michael Conzen,2012

## **Two interconnected intentions:**

- 1. to boost the influence of urban morphology by better packaging and marketing.**
- 2. to raise the level of understanding and application of urban morphology in a range of the relevant professions through the channels of education and professional organisations.**

## Target

- those concerned with describing and analysing urban form (urban historians, geographers, heritage professionals )
- environmental design professionals concerned with prescribing the future ( architects, planners, urban designers, landscape architects)
- the clients or employers of both these groups (public authorities, developers)

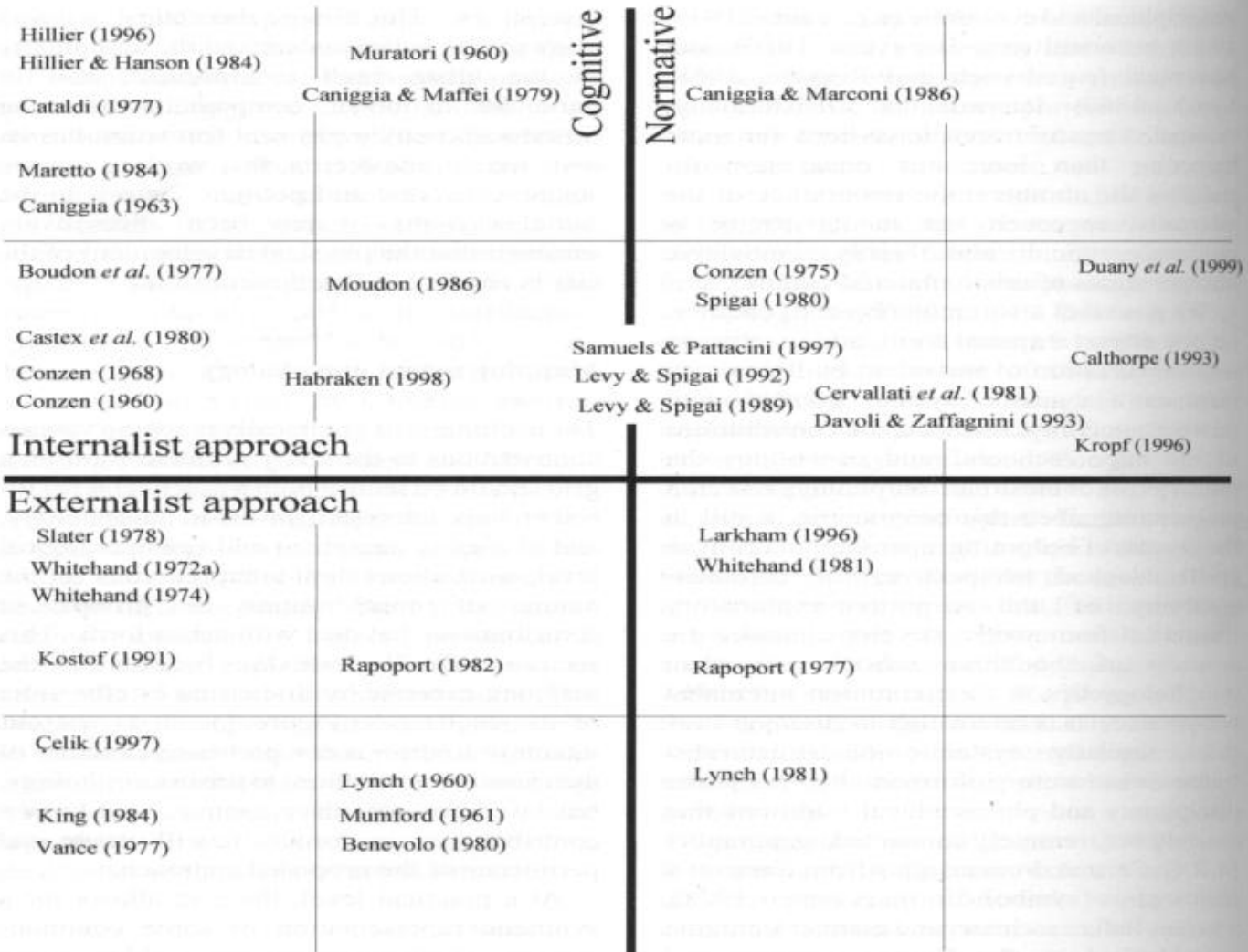
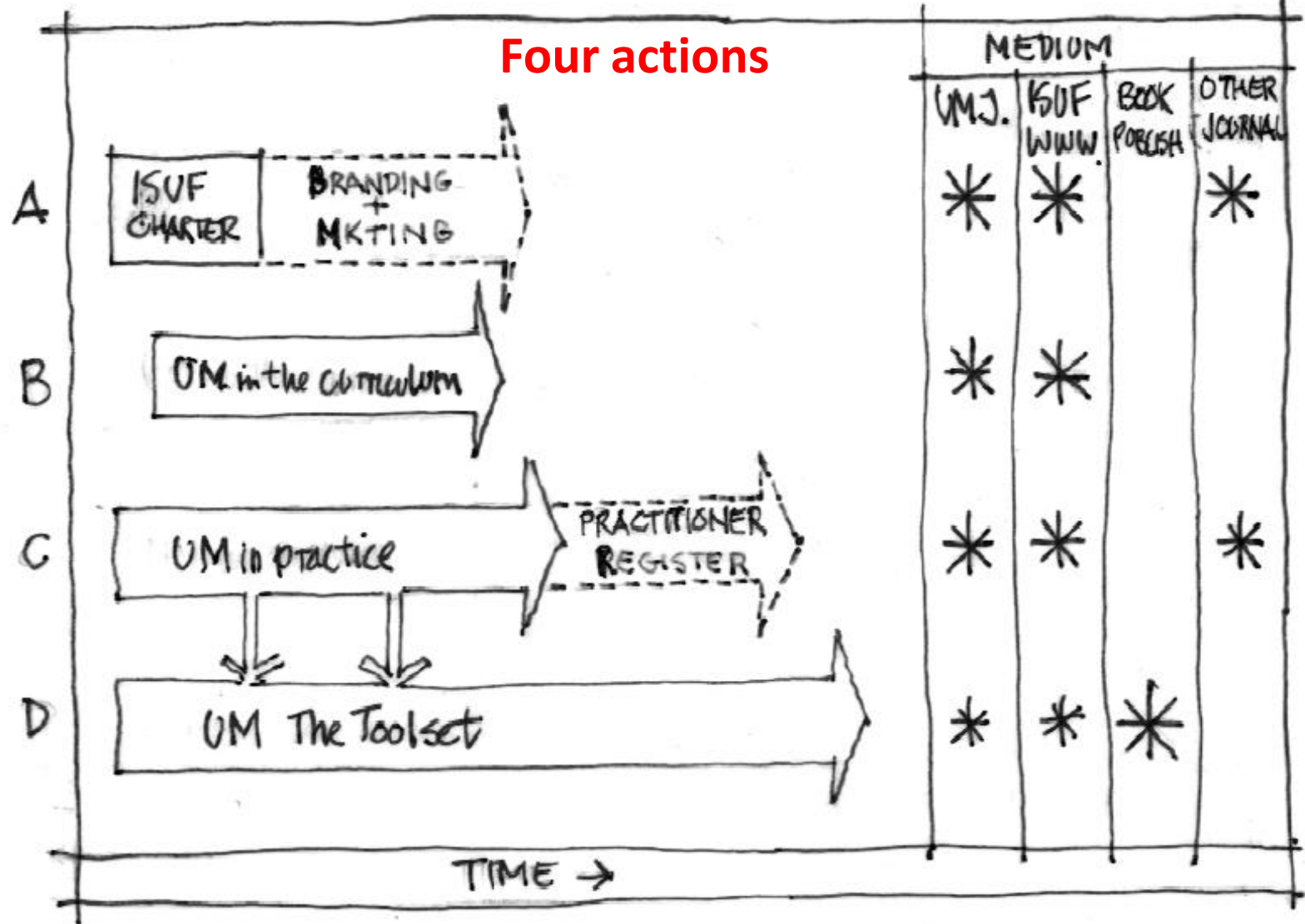


Figure 1. Mapping contributions to the study of urban form.

## Four actions



# Numerous contributions

4

## 1. What do we mean by UM in practice?

KK What do we mean by how is UM being used in practice?

KK The examples given below are off the top of my head so apologies for missing obvious (and less obvious) ones. I think it would be better to be inclusive to start, even if we all might have criticisms of some of the examples – that could come later.

The idea here is the 'nude' theory. It is easier to get people to do things if they see that someone else is already doing it... We need to compile and ILLUSTRATE examples so people can see 'how to do it'.

See at end of this section for referred examples

Vitor O: These are obviously two fundamental questions for our group.

In my view, if we are thinking about linking urban morphology and planning practice we should be open to explore the application of different concepts and methods into different planning systems each with very different planning tools.

For instance, if I consider the Portuguese case, I believe it would be worthy to explore the applicability of Conzenian concepts such as morphological region of fringes belt or of Karl's concept of urban tissue, but also of syntactical methods such as the axial analysis, or of New Urbanists proposals such as the form-based codes or the transect concept.

It is my strong believe that we should be able of building a comprehensive morphological toolkit, of organizing it (in a similar way as presented in Kropp's paper published in UM 13(2)), and of providing some guidance for practitioners to understand «what is the best morphological solution/contribution for my physical planning problems».

FB I strongly agree with this

NM I will try to explain my position on the crucial issue of definition in relation to your Caniggia remark, which is mostly a significant remark to the school itself. If we just assume UM as the study of urban form, the risk is just to focus on one part of the problem. Quoting my old roman ancestors, it implies just to focus on the "urbs". In effect, Caniggia and many of his pupils focused simply on "urbs" which they directly assumed as a sort of all-encompassing issue, absorbing into itself any other aspect. As morphologists (all involved into urban form from different perspectives) we cannot leave aside the "civitas", or all those aspects relating to life (place, society, economy, culture etc...). Into practice, according to me, we should therefore shifting our concern, neither on urbs nor on civitas but on the relation between them. This justifies a truly interdisciplinary institution like ISUF and could empower its diffusion.

I have to admit that this is a "meaning of life" question I wanted to evade since it is potentially such an enormous topic but it seems difficult to avoid in the light of your responses.

However we must try to limit it to a discussion which will enable us to ascertain the extent to which UM is used in practice, how useful it has been and how it can be disseminated, as discussed below.

At the most general level is it the science of urban form or the flexible science of urban form or a science of urban form? The first to me seems to imply the whole of Gautier Gilliland spectrum (see my earlier note) or do we define a range which excludes, for example space syntax which is included in some examinations of practice in UM? If we do not then our task is very difficult.

JMRW It is the science of urban form aspects of space syntax are part of UM .....concentrate on the core of UM as it has developed within ISUF)

Is it a continuous process which must cover the whole spectrum of professional activity from the description of the historical evolution and the character of places to prescribing future changes through design guidance, codes and plans at different scales?

jmrw yes

If the most valuable contribution UM can make is an objective understanding of urban form and how it has evolved then it is most valuable in the descriptive/ analytical part of the spectrum of professional activity – before the introduction of sets of values which must be implicit if not explicit in any form of prescription. Although it is arguable that the choice of categories for analysis involves value judgements.

jmrw yes

I am not convinced that where an exclusive UM approach has been used in a didactic manner to produce designs the result has always been successful. An example is Caniggia's built project in Genoa which I think ignores a whole set of values about the quality of place which did not come from the UM. Hence my plea for an open, eclectic or multi faceted UM.

jmrw Agreed. There is more to urban design

9

## 2. What are the consequences of ignoring the insights of Um in practice?

2. What are the benefits of using urban morphology in practice? (one is avoiding "disasters"...) What are the consequences of ignoring the insights of um in practice?

Pedro: According to my former considerations, ignoring the contribution of UM in practice, increases risk and uncertainty, extends the time in the design process, and reduces the responsiveness of urban form to the context and user's needs. If design is also an informed activity, where about can be found relevant design information from other fields / approaches?

We seem to be able easily to assemble a horror show of these cases e.g. Larkham's recent study in UM of "Lines on maps....", the example of "Sustainable urban neighbourhoods" and English Heritage characterisation, limitations of 2D land use plans etc. etc.

I am not sure how we proceed with these or even bother about it - is it another recommendation to ISUF to publish more of them or indeed an article reviewing cases?

AM This could start with examples of failures in urban planning and design due to poor / inadequate understanding of UM, such as the Barnsley example (circulated earlier) and its urban fringe best being regarded as a "shatter zone" to be filled in. This results in, for instance, loss or compromised heritage or superficially founded urban design concepts as well as the 2D land use basis mentioned by Maria A. and must surely be regarded as of critical importance.

KK This is the opportunity to make the case for why urban morphology is a good link - and also to identify potential applications that have not yet been realized. This would seem to be the place for a manifesto. We need to set out the arguments that we can use to convince the sceptics who will say, why should I bother? What does it get me I can't get elsewhere? And I think we need to be hard headed about this because many in the development industry are - or have set ideas about how to do things.

While undoubtedly there will be different reasons in different contexts, a

VO Perhaps we could present some case studies considering (for the same case study) both the practice and the outcomes of a morphologically-based planning practice, and of a planning practice with no urban form concerns - in distinct time periods.

Maria A: I am agreed with what is quoted by Pedro and perhaps we could show as comparison one or two relevant examples where UM has been used and where not. In this last one the examples of 2D land uses are very useful as negative approach because it does not help in the jump between analytical studies and the Design Proposals.

What I think we should emphasize that UM copes with the essential concept of spatial urban form configuration what is possible to extract from the analysis of tissue if this is analysed in 3D dimension ( what is not very much developed in UM analytical articles). If we extract these fundamental spatial form configurations from the analysis, these immediately face ourselves to various alternatives for design of new spatial interpretations that are strongly linked with the pre-existent form through the spatial types, but are not a copy of the existing one, but a new adequate one. In a way it makes easier the way of creation of design proposals which are not emerging from a "white sheet of paper" as pointed out by Pamerisa & De Ventos (2000 en: La Ciudad no es una hoja en blanco), but from the historical evolution of preexisting spatial context.



## **At Delft four considerations were emphasized :**

**It is important that the outcomes of the various activities of this task force are relevant to the dynamic and rapidly urbanising contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as North America and Europe.**

**The utility of the electronic and imaging tools now available must be recognised and incorporated in the outcomes.**

**Urban morphology has to be made relevant to concerns about environmental performance.**

**The results of the deliberations have to be useful at different scales including those of the city region, both for environmental reasons and because that is the level at which labour and housing markets operate today.**



## B. Urban morphology in the curriculum

We recommend that ISUF should promote the compilation and publishing of curricula from different courses in different countries. These could be used to demonstrate the extent of the incorporation of urban morphological concepts in education and persuade other to adopt them.



**D. The urban morphology manual: a set of tools for understanding the past and planning the future of human settlements.**

**We recommend the production of a publication which synthesises in an accessible form the whole scope of urban morphology. An important source of material for this publication would be the journal *Urban Morphology*.**



## C. The good practice catalogue: how, where and why is urban morphology being used successfully?

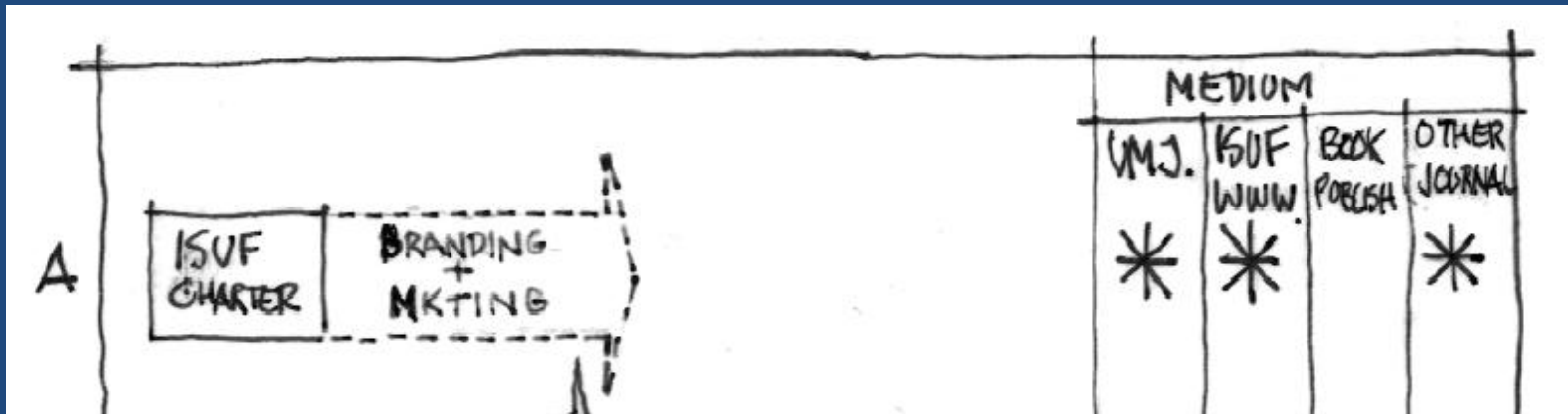
Our recommendation is that *Urban Morphology* encourages contributions that deal directly with the extent to which urban morphology has been applied outside academia and the establishment of a practitioner network to exchange experiences and maintain a register of professionals in the field

**Four bursaries offered and taken up.**

**Study of Porto presented at Brisbane  
published in UM (Oliveira et al, 2014, vol18, no1.23-  
41.)**

**Two studies completed and presented at Porto : St  
Gervais, Ahmedabad.**

**One draft study presented at Porto : Newcastle**



## A. The ISUF manifesto or charter

We recommend that ISUF publishes a manifesto which would set out the arguments for the benefits of using urban morphology.

**“..for many the words urban morphology are immediately off putting”**

Alex Birkhamshaw 2006

**“We are the believers.”**

Ana Niković, Porto 2014

The Porto Charter is aimed at “non believers” who are unfamiliar with urban morphology jargon

# The Porto Charter

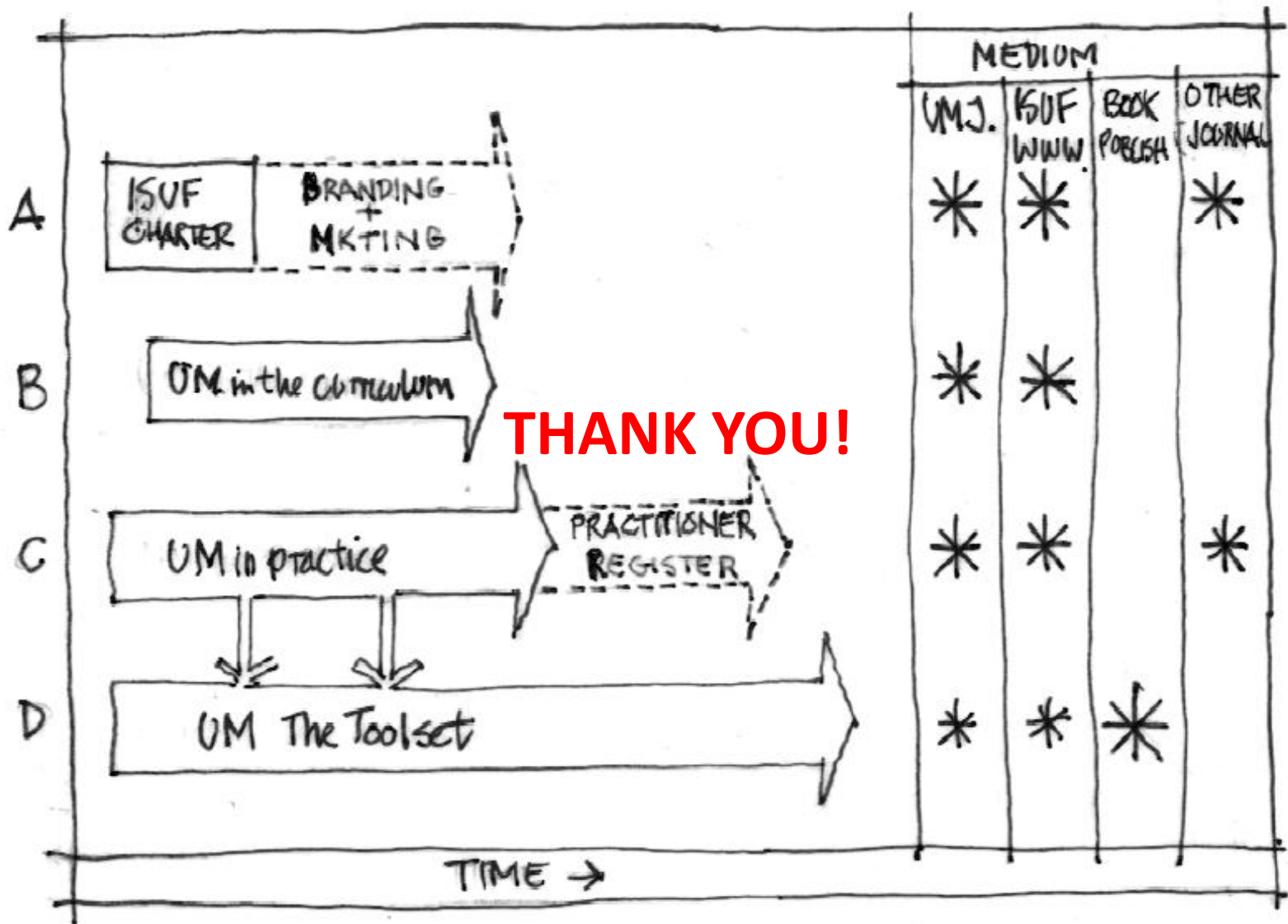
ISUF strives :

draft

To promote urban morphology as the study of the physical form of cities.

- a. To demonstrate the relevance of urban morphology at all scales, from the individual building to the metropolitan region.
- b. To facilitate the international dissemination of urban morphological knowledge, techniques and experience.
- c. While recognising the significance of locality and the natural environment , to promote the recognition of the importance of urban form for its contribution to social and economic well-being.
- d. To stimulate the interaction of intellectual enquiry and practical activity in endeavours concerned with urban form.
- e. To facilitate communication across the range of professions, disciplines, intellectual traditions, and communities of interest concerned with urban form.
- f. To foster comparative studies and assess the impacts of the transfer of concepts and experience in different environments and societies
- g. To promote and facilitate the study of urban form in the training of built environment professionals.





Please send any comments and suggestions to :

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