

After Versailles

Versailles provided a wonderful setting for ISUF to celebrate its fifth annual meeting in July. It was deliberately a small gathering, principally to plan the next year's activities. For many it was the first visit to the new headquarters of ISUF, located in the Ecole d'Architecture de Versailles, which occupies one of the magnificent stable blocks of the Palace.

The discussions at Versailles covered a wide range of academic and practical matters (see pp. 17-21 of this issue). Perhaps most importantly, the arrangements for the next major biannual conference, in Florence, from 23 to 26 July 1999, were agreed (an announcement appears on p. 45). There was also occasion for reflection on the position of urban morphology within the map of knowledge and the position of ISUF and this journal as fledglings in the changing international environment of learned societies and scholarly communication.

Located at the intersection of the arts, humanities, social sciences and, some would argue, the natural sciences, urban morphology as a field of knowledge receives at least its fair share of influence from other fields. However, the nutritional value of this process is not always as great as one would hope. In particular, distinguishing the nutrients from the toxins, and filtering out the latter, is not made easier when pressures to conform to popular fashion continue unabated. An underlying problem in academe generally, and from which urban morphology is not entirely free, is a reluctance, exacerbated by sometimes arbitrary, if not bizarre, government-driven 'performance indicators', to commit energy to long-term projects.

Accompanying the pressure for quick returns and the eschewing of fundamental issues is a casualness in the use of language. The responsibility to minimize this is particularly great in an organization such as ISUF in which imprecision in the use of terms makes even worse the difficulties of translation, not only between languages but also between disciplines. As was demonstrated in the discussion at Versailles of the notion of 'modern' urbanism, it is easy to generate more heat than light if multiple meanings of the same word are used.

The lack of rigour is particularly evident in the uncritical adoption of terms from other fields, a practice in which urban morphologists are far from being the worst culprits. The borrowing from the mass media of words and phrases invented for the purposes of journalism is one aspect of a problem that is rife in the social sciences. The clear formulation of concepts, the coining of appropriate terms and their consistent usage must be among the foremost goals of ISUF.

In accord with this, one of the policies of *Urban Morphology* that was endorsed at the meeting of the Editorial Board at Versailles was the continued use of particularly rigorous refereeing procedures, not only as a means of quality control and the improvement of what is published but as a stimulus to discussion, both privately among authors and referees and, where appropriate, publicly in the 'viewpoints' section of the journal. Bearing in mind that most papers submitted to *Urban Morphology* fail to reach its pages, this gives the refereeing process a useful supplementary role in disseminating good practice, which is perhaps the more important in those parts of the world and those disciplines in which there is limited experience of publication in the journal literature. Currently up to four referees are engaged to advise on a paper submitted to the journal, such wide consultation partly reflecting the range of disciplinary and linguistic backgrounds from which papers emanate.

The other central matter of editorial review, and again reaffirmation, at Versailles, was the policy of maintaining a truly international perspective, as distinct from an Anglo-American one, even though the great variety of first languages of authors necessarily means that publication in English entails an extra task for authors and editors.

Although the journal has, despite its youthfulness, already been approached by a major commercial publishing house with a view to collaboration, the Editorial Board and the Council of ISUF resolved at their Versailles meetings that *Urban Morphology* should for the time being remain entirely within the control of ISUF, so that wide international coverage and a modest subscription can be maintained.

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