

## A century of urban morphology?

This year geographers might with justification celebrate a century of urban morphology. It is just 100 years since Otto Schlüter published two notable papers, one on the ground plan of towns,<sup>1</sup> and the other his views on wider aspects of settlement geography.<sup>2</sup> It might well be argued that these papers marked the formal emergence of urban morphology as a field of enquiry within geography.

Historians of our subject, however, are aware that Schlüter himself built on earlier work, for example most immediately, in his study of town plans, that of Joh Fritz.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if one were to lengthen one's backward glance from centuries to millenia then Alfred North Whitehead's view that the whole of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato has at least a faint echo in urban morphology.

However, it is arguably more to Plato's pupil, Aristotle that we should look if we wish to delve into the ancient antecedence of urban morphology. For it was he who established that a thing is what it is by virtue of its form, using the example of a house. Nevertheless, at risk, in the sweep of history, of being 'provincial in time' - another notion for which we have Whitehead to thank - I shall use this Schlüterian anniversary to reflect on a number of interrelated issues that have immediacy for urban morphology as we move into the twenty-first century.

Two broad, overlapping groups of issues are prominent among those that need to be tackled more energetically than they have been in the past. First, notwithstanding parallel research in other disciplines concerned with form and pioneering work in urban morphology itself, there is a need for a good deal more research on the classification of forms and the clarification of associated concepts. This is an even more complex task than it might superficially appear and one that requires clear thinking about the purposes of urban morphology: progress on this count will greatly benefit the development of urban morphology as a field of knowledge. Secondly, there is a need for much more exploration of the place of both theory in general and specific theories, bearing in mind, among other things, the problems posed by the nature of both urban form itself and the records of it upon which we rely. In both these matters, hitherto slow progress, by most standards, reflects in large degree the fact that on a spectrum from the most abstract to the most concrete, the distribution of urban morphologists is clearly skewed towards the latter.

*Urban Morphology* has a role to play in fulfilling these needs and related ones. The exhortation to those submitting papers to the journal must be to set their work in a conceptual framework that facilitates links to other studies so that the corporate achievement is much greater than the sum of individual contributions. If the condition of urban morphology is viewed world-wide, as we enter our second century - or reach the middle of our third millennium, depending on the length of one's temporal scan - a key requirement is to refine, sometimes form-ulate, and disseminate concepts of wide significance. In this way we can achieve a much more effective understanding, assimilation and comparison of the results of a significant number of already completed, if not always published, individual case studies, as well as enhance the effectiveness of current and future work.

This is a major challenge, not just because of the complexity of the settlements that are the objects of our investigation, reflecting in some cases millenia of development, but because they are world-wide. Adequately representing the great geographical scope of our subject matter is especially demanding. Unlike the cultural perspectives that dominate our libraries and, with all too rare exceptions, our conferences, the world's settlements are not overwhelmingly the progeny of North America and the western extremities of Europe. Most are in large part, if not entirely, the products of other cultures. Unfortunately, the majority of those investigating the forms of non-Western settlements, particularly researchers indigenous to the countries in which those settlements are located, are scarcely visible in a world in which academic agendas are heavily influenced, if not indirectly or directly driven, by Western governments. Furthermore, communications, including the mouthpieces of academics, are increasingly dominated by profit-maximizing Western commercial publishers. Financial expediency frequently, if not habitually, overrides intellectual criteria in shaping the map of even the most academic endeavours.

In these circumstances a major effort is necessary to ensure that fundamental issues receive the discussion and dissemination they deserve. A central purpose of *Urban Morphology* is to stimulate, facilitate and promote this effort. Contributions on philosophical, methodological, theoretical and practical issues, may take the form of either

full-length articles or short contributions to the 'viewpoints' section of the journal. Studies of specific places and geographical areas that also explore more general issues, fundamental or applied or both, are especially welcome.

Schlüter set an agenda primarily within the framework of geography as it existed 100 years ago. Now is the time to explore a new agenda with much wider interdisciplinary possibilities, taking advantage of the technical transformation of communications, especially the growth of electronic media, to create a genuinely world view - a view that would surely have gladdened Schlüter's heart.

#### Notes

1. Schlüter, O. (1899) 'Über den Grundriss der Städte', *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 34, 446-62.
2. Schlüter, O. (1899) 'Bemerkungen zur Siedlungsgeographie', *Geographische Zeitschrift* 5, 65-84.
3. Fritz, J. (1894) 'Deutsche Stadtanlagen', *Beilage zum Programm 520 des Lyzeums Strassburg* (Strassburg).

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