Meeting of minds?

In her President's Report (this issue, pp. 43-6), Anne Vernez Moudon notes the maturing of ISUF as an organization. What started in 1994 as a meeting of 23 urban morphologists (mainly architects and geographers) from five countries has become an almost world-wide network. At that first meeting, in Lausanne, Switzerland, a good deal of attention focused on three approaches, for which the national 'labels' British, French and Italian provided a shorthand. Previous attempts at bridge-building notwithstanding, the British (perhaps more accurately Anglo-German or Conzenian) geographical approach had had a largely separate development from the other two. The French architects had been influenced to some extent by the Caniggian school of Italian architects, but in other respects developed, with the Swiss, a somewhat different set of perspectives.

Nearly 7 years on, and with a formal organizational structure, journal, commissions and working parties well established, it is not too soon to be assessing the intellectual benefits that ISUF is providing, particularly by stimulating and facilitating international and interdisciplinary developments. What improvement has there been in the understanding of the different approaches presented in Lausanne in 1994 and to what extent has ISUF explored the wider range of research and practice in urban morphology?

In relation to the first of these questions it is manifest, both in this journal and in the contents of papers presented at conferences organized by ISUF, that the different schools of thought out of which ISUF sprang are vigorously communicating their work. There is much less evidence, however, of attempts to explore the relationships between the arguments and empirical evidence of one school with those of another, some notable exceptions notwithstanding. What, for example, are the implications of the Caniggian 'typological process' for the Conzenian 'morphological period'?

A sizeable language barrier between the Caniggian school and the Conzenian school is compounded by the disciplinary boundary between architecture and geography. Attempts to reduce this particular combination of barriers are therefore most welcome. The preparation of an English translation of Gianfranco Caniggia and Gian Luigi Maffei's *Composizione architettonica e tipologia edilizia 1: letture dell'edilizia di base* is a case in point (see this issue, pp. 47-8). The working party set up to advise on the English rendering of this text, especially the explanation and expression of concepts and the translation of terms, has an important function, for attempts to build bridges between disciplines and languages can easily founder if ideas are not accurately communicated. To wrestle with concepts from another intellectual perspective is difficult enough without the additional burden of coping with meanings that have been distorted in translation.

With regard to research and practice beyond the principal interest groups from which ISUF sprang, it is salutary to refer back to attempts over the past 15 years to review developments in the field of urban morphology. A feature of these surveys is the number of different approaches that they reveal. Furthermore, it does not require a detailed analysis of citation patterns to become aware that most adherents of a given approach rarely refer to the work of adherents of other approaches. Research in urban morphology, all of it concerned with 'urban form' (without assuming an unduly wide definition of that term), is proceeding according to about half a dozen different approaches and at least two of them have little or no representation in the conferences or publications of ISUF. Thus what Batty describes, in an editorial in *Environment and Planning B*, as 'conventional approaches to urban morphology such as those based on fractal geometry and space syntax', employ 'languages' that are far from being the stock-in-trade of many ISUF members, and the research programme for urban morphology that he outlines makes little reference to concerns that have been uppermost in the pages of this journal. And though he uses the term 'morphogenesis', the 'dynamics of change' denoted by that term in his vocabulary has a connotation different from that in its Conzenian usage.

In Batty's terms ISUF has so far probably done little to produce the prerequisites of the research programme that he envisages for urban morphology, namely to construct models that link structure to process, to agree the basic units with which to describe urban form, and to derive spatial relations consistent with the underlying geometry and geography of cities. However, from a more eclectic standpoint the typological process of the Caniggian school has considerable potential, providing a link between generations of building forms and a learning process which, in turn, suggest links with a possibly more general process of cultural transmission, as Kropf suggests on pages 29-42 of this issue. And in relation to the problem of agreeing units of description, though it is less obviously a challenge where
mathematical precision is not involved, the issue of comparability will be hard to avoid as ISUF squares up to the major problem of terminology that has been referred to on a number of occasions in the pages of *Urban Morphology*: currently comparisons between the findings of different pieces of research are difficult even when the projects on which they are based share a common intellectual perspective.

Clearly urban morphologists are travelling down a number of different roads. Some of these are within hailing distance of each other. Others are not, and even if they were the different groups of travellers following them might well not understand each other. Who will construct the street plan on which these journeys are being made? Will the construction of breakthrough streets bring together some of these hitherto separate groups and make fellow travellers of them? And if so, would it be unduly sanguine to anticipate a meeting of minds?

Notes


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