

Mental maps of urban morphology

Members of ISUF's discussion list will know that Webmaster Elwin Koster has invited them to list the ten publications they consider provide the best introduction to urban morphology. In view of the sizable number of countries and disciplines to which members belong, it will come as no surprise if the lists vary a good deal, and publications little known in some parts of the world may well come to light. Unfortunately the generally low response rate to requests for such information limits the usefulness of the results. At a guess, mental maps of urban morphology as a field of knowledge are unlikely to be transformed by this exchange of bibliographies, even in the case of members who are quite new to research in the field.

As in any branch of knowledge, attempts to identify a core literature can benefit from a variety of bibliographical aids. Among the more useful, as far as research publications are concerned, are citation indexes. Curiously, the quest for the ten best introductory publications in urban morphology has coincided with the decision by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) to include *Urban Morphology* in the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* and *Current Contents: Arts & Humanities*. Inclusion in these publications will enhance awareness of the contents of *Urban Morphology* and hence the probability of their citation. It will increase the ease with which bibliographical information on urban morphology can be compiled, since all citations appearing in *Urban Morphology* will in future be included in the ISI's data. If, for example, one wished to discover, from the ISI's databases, the articles citing the publications suggested by members of the discussion list, included among them in future will be any published in *Urban Morphology*. It will also make it easier to identify linkages between authors: it might even help us clarify whether there really is a French school of urban morphology!

However, it is important, perhaps particularly so in an era of large, sometimes indiscriminately used on-line databases, not to assume that the existence of a citation is in some way the attribution of profundity to what is cited. Many factors affect the number of citations that a publication receives, not least the selection of publications (usually journals) on which the database draws and the popularity of particular research fields. Remarkable though the ISI's citation indexes are as vehicles for bibliographical exploration, the fact that they draw their citations largely from journals published in English is clearly a drawback in a field such as urban morphology in which a large proportion of the literature is in other languages, much of it in books.

Excursions into the ISI's databases can be salutary, particularly if time is taken to explore behind crude numbers of citations, or 'hits' as the ISI calls them, to consider, for example, the context in which citations are made. Contributions acknowledged for their originality may be less cited than commentaries spanning a broad field. Furthermore, it should not be taken for granted that a cited publication is actually well understood by those citing it, as some have discovered when they have checked the way in which particular publications have been used by those citing them.¹ The citations of the publications of Gianfranco Caniggia and M.R.G. Conzen have been numerous in recent years, many of them in *Urban Morphology*, but how many of those citing them have a good understanding of their contents? It is one thing to doff one's cap, by adding a citation, and another, of course, to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the work in question to draw upon it reliably in one's own work.

While citations provide a fascinating web of linkages of which all of us, mainly through our writings, are a part, they are means not ends. How much more challenging it is to tackle the issues that arise when we seek to explore the *conceptual* relationships between major contributions to our field. I venture to suggest that in the case of the publications of Caniggia and Conzen this is one of the main challenges for urban morphologists in the first decade of this century. Meeting it is unlikely to be aided much by citation analysis. But work at that cutting edge and others, and indeed within areas distant from the frontiers of research, can benefit indirectly in a myriad ways from improved bibliographical tools. And the increased opportunities these provide need to be exploited to the full in clarifying, refining and redefining our mental maps of urban morphological knowledge.

Note

1. Whitehand, J.W.R. (1987) 'What's in a citation?', *Area* 19, 170-1.

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