

An Italian focus and beyond

This issue of *Urban Morphology* focuses on urban morphology in Italy. Not only are the main articles it contains by Italian architects about the work of Italian scholars and practitioners, but it reports on a major event in Italy - a seminar on the life and work of Gianfranco Caniggia. It also presages the Tenth International Seminar on Urban Form, to be held in Trani, Italy in July 2003.

The very fact of having a thematic issue on Italian research and practice is a measure of the importance of the Italian contribution to urban morphology, especially that of Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia. By the end of 2003 it is the intention that the principal ideas of architects of the Caniggian school will have been aired both in ISUF meetings and in *Urban Morphology*. This is preparing the ground for comparison with ideas of the Conzenian school of mainly English-speaking geographers in 2004, when ISUF meets in Glasgow, Scotland and Newcastle upon Tyne, England.

In anticipation of these comparative studies it is intriguing to reflect on how similar Caniggia and M.R.G. Conzen were in their perspectives and ideas. The similarities are remarkable when account is taken of the different ages, disciplines and working environments of these two scholars and, most of all, that they remained unaware of one another's work virtually throughout their lives.

Both Caniggia and Conzen were above all concerned with cities as historical phenomena. Yet they were concerned to conceptualize these phenomena in a manner, and to a degree, that contrasts with the essentially descriptive approaches that characterize much historical writing on cities. For example, both recognized cycles in development, and focused on periodicities in the creation and adaptation of physical forms. The effects of the past on the present and the future were for both of them critical: every cycle was unique not least because it was inescapably linked to, and subject to the constraints of, previous cycles. In particular, stress was placed on the fact that forms created on the ground during previous periods influenced the practicability of different types of change. The plots initially created in an area, and the first buildings created within them, were seen as powerfully influencing subsequent developments.

Precedence was given by both Caniggia and Conzen to the predominant forms in the landscape: the huge number of ordinary, undistinguished buildings rather than the small minority of buildings of architectural distinction. And the accent was on general processes rather than the individual people responsible for particular buildings. While Conzen was arguably above all concerned with configurations in space, this concern was also evident in Caniggia's work.¹ Both were wedded to reading and interpreting the built environments in which they lived.

It is hard to avoid too the inference that there were similarities in their personalities. Both were prepared to fly in the face of fashion, steadfastly maintaining their views whilst others pursued more fashionable lines of enquiry.

Although in the last two decades both Caniggia's and Conzen's ideas have attracted increasing attention, progress in bringing comparative analyses of their work to publication has been slow.² Despite numerous passing references to both scholars, the conceptual developments that integrative studies promise are still in gestation. Such explorations at the boundary between architectural and geographical urban morphology are of great interest and potential. Arguably at least as important, however, is the stimulus they can provide for theoretical thinking in urban morphology more generally.

The articles in this issue help set the scene for these endeavours: they map the cognitive landscapes on the Italian architectural side of the boundary. However, the interdisciplinary challenges have yet to attract a sizable body of researchers and practitioners. In the language of mountaineering, we are still in the foothills. Nevertheless, as we seek to identify routes through the lower levels of the interdisciplinary climb, we can contemplate, and even survey, the peaks that lie ahead, even if scaling them is a less immediate prospect.

Notes

1. See, for example, Caniggia, G. and Maffei, G.L. (2001) *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* (Alinea, Firenze).
2. For an exception, see Marzot, N. (1998) 'The role of history in Conzen's and Caniggia's approaches to urban morphology', *Urban Morphology* 2, 54-5. For a major, still largely unpublished, comparative study, see Kropf, K.S. (1993) 'An enquiry into the definition of built form in urban morphology', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham.

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