

Taking a broader view

'When you see the particular, always look for the general': this advice from Albrecht Penck to his students in Berlin nearly 80 years ago is as relevant now as it was then. But how many heed it? Failure to do so is the most important single reason why papers submitted to *Urban Morphology* are rejected. Other, more accessible, evidence of a lack of concern for issues of general significance exists in many of the papers submitted to ISUF's conferences. The number of papers offered has burgeoned, but case studies dominate; and too few of them are driven by, or benefit from, concepts of general, or at least wide, significance.

This state of affairs is not, of course, confined to urban morphology: it exists widely in the humanities. It was more excusable in a world partitioned by national and disciplinary boundaries. But the imminent demise of those partitions was signalled within urban morphology when ISUF was founded a decade ago. Even so, the legacy of the era before mass electronic communication is still with us. Habits die hard. Inherently interdisciplinary though urban morphology is, papers offered at conferences and to the journal tend to be couched in terms particular to a discipline or place or both. This continues to be true of proposals of papers for ISUF 2004.

ISUF, however, has been providing a powerful lead in the drive to break down disciplinary and national barriers and stimulate the integration of local studies within wider frameworks. Most obviously, perhaps, there are ISUF's international conferences, its web site and its journal. These are all developing in the direction of greater international and interdisciplinary coverage and usage. Eighty per cent of the usage of the web site, measured by visits over the 2-year period November 2001 - November 2003, is from outside the United States, and the authors of journal articles and conference papers are located in numerous different countries.

Of current developments in interdisciplinarity and internationality within ISUF, two are particularly striking. One is the Inter-national Urban Form Study. Spear-headed by Kwang-Joong Kim, this remarkable inter-national collaboration under the joint auspices of the Seoul Development Institute and ISUF is embracing geographical, historical and planning aspects of six 'world' cities, including two each from Asia, North America and Europe. It has brought together researchers from Canada, France, Korea, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, and from the main disciplines that contribute to urban morphology. The other is the development by Michael Conzen, in this journal, of book review sections and book note sections that make the equivalent coverage in most other journals appear not only geographically parochial but, to paraphrase Ivor Samuels, in need of treatment for interdisciplinary myopia and anglophone squint.¹ In this issue of the journal these two sections include books emanating from seventeen different countries, one-half of the books being in languages other than English. The countries in which reviewers are based are similarly diverse, and the disciplines of the reviewers include architecture, geography, history, landscape architecture and urban planning.

It might seem paradoxical in this light, in a world of electronic communication, that a significant gap exists between the contents of the academic media and the mindsets of many researchers and practitioners. Clues to the resolution of the paradox are to be found, I suspect, in the pre-electronic research literature on diffusion - in the distinctions that have been recognized between personal and impersonal communication and between *information* about ideas and their actual adoption.² It is true that more urban morphologists now collaborate and function in groups, either working in physical proximity to one another or linked by communication networks to form 'invisible colleges', creating environments in which ideas are assimilated by personal contact. But many continue to pursue lonely trails, uncovering the facts at their particular part of the research frontier without drawing upon widely recognized concepts and methods. Linguistic, disciplinary and other barriers have been reduced but meetings of minds require changes that are not only informational and intellectual but also emotional. Penck's advice is deceptively simple. Applying it is more difficult.

Notes

1. Samuels, I. (2003) 'The death and life of the urban block', unpublished Christmas lecture to the Urban Design Group, London, 3 December.
2. See, for example, Whitehand, J.W.R. and Pratt, M.C. (1975) 'Some basic assumptions in diffusion research', *Area* 7, 87-93.

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