

Linking disciplines: typological process and spatial process

The meetings of ISUF in August 2004 in the UK were a dual celebration. First, they were a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of ISUF. Secondly, they marked the fortieth anniversary of another notable event in the annals of urban morphology, the excursions led by M.R.G. Conzen on the occasion of the Twentieth International Geographical Congress in 1964. Anniversaries are a time for reminiscence and prescience. And there was time for both in these meetings organized by ISUF consecutively in Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne: the first as part of the Thirtieth International Geographical Congress (this issue, pp. 105-7), and the second a Post-Congress Symposium in Urban Morphology (this issue, pp. 107-10).

In addition to reports on this veritable cornucopia for those of a historical and speculative inclination, there is in this issue (pp. 71-89) a history of urban morphology which documents the antecedence of many of the ideas discussed in Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne. Appropriately for a symposium taking place within the area that M.R.G. Conzen made his laboratory, a major focus of discussion in Newcastle was Conzenian ideas, and this was anticipated by a number of contributions in Glasgow. In both meetings this was for some participants the first close encounter not only with this type of thinking but also with the places where many of its key concepts were formulated. For others it was an opportunity to exchange ideas about familiar concepts, not least confronted with actual physical forms in the field that these concepts were created to explain.

For many familiar with Conzenian thinking one of the major intellectual challenges was to reconcile its concepts with those of the Caniggian school. Several projects have recently been conceived with this purpose and the meetings in Glasgow and Newcastle offered the first major opportunity both to hear reports on projects currently being pursued and for thinking aloud. The prospect of at least a partial integration of the two schools of thought is an exciting one on both sides. Progress would seem to rely heavily on teasing out relationships between key concepts employed until recently almost exclusively by either architects or geographers. The affinities between the typological process and such spatio-temporal processes as the burgage cycle and fringe-belt development are particularly intriguing. That the conceptual relationships have implications extending well beyond architecture and geography, most obviously into archaeology, history and planning, and more speculatively, but perhaps at least as fundamentally, into such disciplines as psychology and philosophy, is heady stuff indeed.

It is appropriate in focusing on issues in Conzenian thinking, particularly in the home of town-plan analysis, that plan units should figure prominently, including in discussions on the need for more comparative research based on the large number of contributions to the European Historic Towns Atlas Programme. However, the neglect of, and at times confusion with or even failure to recognize the existence of, the broader concept of the morphological region is a cause for concern. While debate and speculation are of the essence, the outcome is liable to be confusing in the absence of terminological precision. By the same token, realization of the potential of GIS depends on the application of appropriate, clearly specified concepts. There are also key concepts that are largely absent from current debate: the concept of the morphological period, and the need for its examination in relation to the typological process, was relatively neglected in Glasgow and Newcastle, as it has been more generally.

Needless to say, conceptual clarity and cross-disciplinary integration, important though they are, are not sufficient. Painstaking observation is also essential, as Conzen amply demonstrated. Unfortunately none of these important attributes of good research are encouraged by the RAE mentality, to use a British label for the current preoccupation with research performance indicators.

ISUF 2004 demonstrated the pressing need to develop further, and where appropriate integrate, the conceptual frameworks provided by the masters. However, as they themselves recognized, there is also a need to explore other perspectives, standing on other shoulders as opportunities arise.

J.W.R. Whitehand