

Understanding and shaping urban landscape character

Urban morphology is inherently concerned with the character of urban places: the object of study, it is often maintained, is the urban landscape, and the character of that landscape is central. However, urban morphologists by no means have monopoly rights either in 'urban landscape' or, even more obviously, in 'character'. 'Landscape' and 'character' are words that have both various general usages and those more specific to certain fields of knowledge. Since urban morphology attracts the interest of members of several disciplines, it is not surprising that there is room for confusion in the usage of these terms, as indeed of many others. This has not been helped by metaphorical usages such as 'linguistic landscape' and 'political landscape' - 'follies of fashion' as Neef (1981, p.80) termed them in the still unpublished second edition of his remarkable monograph *Die theoretischen Grundlagen der Landschaftslehre* (Neef, 1967). There is not only the problem of inconsistencies of usage within disciplines but, arguably more importantly in this case, between disciplines.

A far from exhaustive list of disciplines, or at least fields of knowledge, in which an interest in urban landscapes is pursued, nearly all of them represented from time to time in the pages of this journal, includes planning, architecture, geography, history, ecology, archaeology, landscape architecture, art and urban design. Each tends to have developed its own perspectives, organizational structures and publications, often with little or no cross-referencing to other relevant fields. There is a need, therefore, for care in the use of terms for a multi-disciplinary readership. Achieving the necessary clarity is dependent on articulating the conceptions of urban landscape character in the relevant academic and applied fields. There is also a need for interdisciplinary comparative study of those conceptions and of approaches, methods and practical applications.

One of the major achievements of ISUF has been to foster an intellectual environment in which proponents of different specialisms have been drawn closer together. This followed a lengthy period, during much of the second half of the twentieth century, when separate disciplinary development prevailed, to the detriment of inherently interdisciplinary fields. In the case of urban morphology, the bringing together now of researchers and practitioners from a variety of fields is drawing attention to notable contrasts in standpoints and ways of working. In this issue two contributions deal explicitly with urban landscape 'character' in strikingly different ways. Cooper (pp. 95-107) investigates a method of providing a numerical assessment of one aspect of urban landscape character, namely the 'indentations' along the sides of streets that relate to gaps between buildings and indentations within building façades. This is in contrast, both in scale and method, to the programme of broad-brush English Heritage characterizations of the urban landscape described by Thomas (pp. 128-30). In this countrywide programme areas of different 'character types' are delimited based principally on predominant land use or building type. The past character of these areas is then established by using historical sources, notably maps. There is a resemblance to the areas of homogeneous character recognized in the *Planes Especiales* produced for parts of certain Spanish urban areas (Barke, 2003), though those are more detailed and closer to, though not as detailed as, the urban landscape units recognized by geographers working in the Conzenian tradition (see, for example, Conzen, 1988, p. 258).

The widely differing approaches to 'characterization' described by Cooper and Thomas are but two examples of a wide range of attempts to recognize and delimit landscape character. These span from largely quantitative approaches, of which that by Guy (2005) is a very recent example, to highly qualitative ones (see, for example, Sternberg, 1996). The differences reflect in part the various routes by which researchers and practitioners have approached landscape study, and their various disciplinary starting points. The archaeologists who have been predominant among those responsible for undertaking the programme of English Heritage surveys have approached the task strongly influenced by their earlier rural landscape characterizations. This may partly account for differences that are evident when their delimitations are compared with those of the primarily geographical Conzenian school. However, the difference between the largely English intellectual roots of the archaeologists mainly responsible for the programme and the essentially German roots of the Conzenian tradition is almost certainly a more important part of the explanation.

In considering the variety of approaches to urban landscape character and how they have arisen, it is important not to forget the differing purposes and scales of investigation. Nevertheless, there are general issues that arise in relation to the wide spectrum of work of this type. Two particularly merit attention.

First, lest we spend time needlessly reinventing, it is necessary to be conscious of the shortness of living memory relative to the lifespans of fields of knowledge, even fields as young as urban morphology. Much of what today interests researchers and practitioners about urban landscape character has been mulled over previously, though to do justice to the range of discussion entails crossing boundaries between disciplines and language areas. The geographical literature on land-scape more generally, and indeed on the closely-related but not identical concept of *Landschaft*, was reviewed long ago by Hartshorne (1939, pp. 149-74), and is a rich source. Systematic thought on the definition of geography as the study of the character of areas dates back well over a century, reflections on the early work having been provided by Hettner (1927) and summarized in Hartshorne's (1959) remarkable distillation.

Secondly, there is the way in which the identification of landscape character can and should influence planning. It is important to be conscious of two aspects especially. On the one hand, there is a need for greater clarity about the nature of the benefits, particularly intellectual, aesthetic and practical, to be derived from appreciation of landscape character (Conzen, 1966). On the other, there is a need for enhanced understanding of how these benefits relate to the perceptual equipment and knowledge of those who experience and 'use' landscapes. The last entails links to psychology and even physiology, as Guy (2002) has reminded us. Interdisciplinary thinking is again at a premium.

ISUF has already made progress towards uniting the diverse intellectual and practical strands that contribute to understanding and shaping the urban landscape. But the liberation of researchers and practitioners from their sectional mindsets, especially those buttressed by powerful disciplinary and professional boundary walls, has scarcely begun. The pages of *Urban Morphology* are there for those who take up this important interdisciplinary challenge.

References

- Barke, M. (2003) 'Urban landscape regions and conservation: new approaches and problems in Antequera, Málaga Province, Spain', *Urban Morphology* 7, 3-13.
- Conzen, M.R.G. (1966) 'Historical townscapes in Britain: a problem in applied geography', in House, J.W. (ed.) *Northern geographical essays in honour of G.H.J. Daysh* (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne) 56-78.
- Conzen, M.R.G. (1988) 'Morphogenesis, morphological regions and secular human agency in the historic townscape, as exemplified by Ludlow', in Denecke, D. and Shaw, G. (eds) *Urban historical geography: recent progress in Britain and Germany* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) 253-72.
- Guy, B. (2002) 'The demystification of character', unpublished paper presented to the Planning Research Conference, Dundee, April.
- Guy, B. (2005) 'Spatial urbanism: public space typology as urban planning zones', unpublished PhD thesis, Anglia Polytechnic University.
- Hartshorne, R. (1939) *The nature of geography: a critical survey of current thought in the light of the past* (Association of American Geographers, Lancaster, Pennsylvania).
- Hartshorne, R. (1959) *Perspective on the nature of geography* (Rand McNally, Chicago) 146-72.
- Hettner, A. (1927) *Die Geographie: ihre Geschichte, ihre Wesen und ihre Methoden* (Hirt, Breslau).
- Neef, E. (1967) *Die theoretischen Grundlagen der Landschaftslehre* (Haack, Gotha).
- Neef, E. (1981) 'The theoretical foundations of landscape study', unpublished MS, translated from German by I.F. Hellen and A.J. Hellen.
- Sternberg, E. (1996) 'A case of iconographic competition: the building industry and the postmodern landscape', *Journal of Urban Design* 1, 145-63.

