

Information explosion and intellectual challenge

As research burgeons, and access to its results widens – thanks in major part to information technology – so problems of knowledge assimilation by individuals become more evident. Many researching into urban form have become hard pressed just keeping abreast of the literature emanating from their own country and in one language. The fact that Gilliland and Gauthier, in their survey of the study of urban form in Canada (this issue, pp. 51-66), cite no less than 172 publications, old and new, gives just an inkling of what encompassing the worldwide literature of urban morphology must entail.

Of course the tasks, and achievements, of our forebears were by no means minimal either. We sometimes forget that notable scholars of earlier generations assimilated the writings on urban form across several disciplines and languages (see, for example, Giovannoni, 1931). But the sheer bulk of the literature today and the variety of compartments within which it exists, for example according to discipline, sub-discipline, school of thought, language, and intended readership, are a challenge to the most capacious and versatile minds.

As if the problems of assimilation were not enough, there are also those of integration. These too increase as specialisms divide and multiply. And the problems relate not just to the multiplication of types of subject matter. There is also the challenge of reconciling different perspectives on the same, or similar, subject matter.

Within urban morphology the challenges presented by the growth in the number and diversity of relevant publications, though modest in comparison with those in some fields, are daunting. They may for simplicity be conceived of initially as a number of tasks of bridge-building: for example, between disciplines, notably architecture, geography and planning; between language areas; between schools of thought; and, not least, between research, policy, and the lives, and environmental awareness and understanding, of ordinary people.

Several aspects of these tasks are evident in this issue. For example Kropf (pp. 70-3) recounts the contrasting reactions of two readers to his translation of an Italian text into English: it was not only that their reactions were rooted in training in different disciplines (in this case architecture and geography) but also, Kropf hypothesizes, that they differed in their proneness to curiosity and boredom. One, the geographer, was concerned to ‘iron out the prose’, whereas the other, the architect, relished its abstruseness. Different styles of expression can provide barriers to understanding that require bridge-building efforts not unlike those required to overcome more frequently recognized barriers such as interdisciplinary ones and those between languages.

One of the greatest challenges to reconciling different sectional interests must surely be to bring together historical and ahistorical standpoints. Guy (this issue, pp. 73-6) takes an essentially ahistorical approach to sense of place, in marked contrast to the historical one that has characterized a number of contributions to this journal. Chapman (this issue, pp. 23-40) draws on both approaches.

If the tasks of assimilating, connecting and integrating are difficult for those steeped in the subject matter of urban morphology, spare a thought too for those trying to build bridges to policy making. It is a moot point whether the quantified configurations recommended by Guy are readily reduced to the bullet points (preferably no more than three!) beloved of policy makers. Or indeed whether Chapman’s more historically-grounded recommendations could be meaningfully compressed in a similar way.

The extent to which each of these contributions can enhance lay appreciation of the urban landscape is in a sense an extension of this question. However, this goes deeper than coping with the continuing rise of ‘public participation’ in decision-making. It is closely linked to the fundamental question of how people assimilate knowledge about, gain experience from, and interact with the urban forms that constitute an increasingly dominant part of their environment.

Such questions are among those at the heart of urban morphology, and will no doubt be the stuff of recurring debates in this journal as it continues to expand. In seeking to cast light on them, we need all the support that advances in other fields, not least in information technology, can provide. As always, however, the core problem remains an intellectual one.

Reference

- Giovanni, G. (1931) *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova* (Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, Torino).

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