

Towards a more integrated approach

ISUF is undergoing an important phase in its development. Conceived 12 years ago as a worldwide network of researchers and practitioners in urban morphology, it is itself giving birth to geographical sub-groups. The Nordic Network of Urban Morphology successfully organized its first conference, in Stockholm, last month, and there is evidence of other nascent regional groups, developments that the President and Council of ISUF are seeking to encourage. At the same time as these organizational changes are occurring there are important issues to be addressed concerning the development of urban morphology as a field of knowledge.

One of the more important of those issues is the need for a more integrated approach than has hitherto been characteristic of urban morphology despite increasing awareness of the field's interdisciplinary and international character. Though ISUF has brought together a remarkable diversity of national, linguistic and disciplinary groups, far more comparative studies are needed that cross the boundaries between these groups. Furthermore, there is still a tendency for individual studies to suffer from the long-standing problem of being weakly connected with one another. It is not uncommon for the added value of new work to be less than it could be owing to the fact that conceptualizations and empirical findings are not linked to those of previous research, for example studies of similar type in other locations. Greater attention is needed to the building up of conceptual frameworks and the connecting of individual studies to those frameworks. Integral to this is the critiquing of studies that have contributed conceptual foundations in the past, so that what emerges from those critiques can provide sound bases for further work.

Weak integration is a problem not least in a field in which urban morphology arguably has its most obvious application: urban landscape management. It debilitates urban landscape planning at all scales. At the macro scale, the little attention given to cities as entities, and how the various parts of cities fit together, is a particular problem. This is especially so in relation to the attention that needs to be given to historico-geographical conceptions, such as those that emphasize the way in which the pulsations of urban growth put their stamp on city configurations and provide a framework for not only understanding urban morphological structure but also planning internal change and conservation. At the micro scale, unneighbourly buildings and other misfit juxtapositions are obvious products of inadequate attention to the way in which individual forms relate to one another.

To some extent these problems of poor integration in planning-related matters reflect the habitual compartmentalization of thinking. Important in the present context are the weak contacts between urban morphologists and urban designers. One might expect urban morphology to be one of the fundamental disciplines that feed urban design, much as biological research supports medicine. The reality in much of the world is different. Part of the problem is the rigidity of disciplinary and professional boundaries. Another factor is the limited extent to which urban morphologists have presented the results of research in ways, and places, that make evident their relevance to others.

The problem of compartmentalized thinking does, of course, need to be seen in much wider terms than the urban morphologist's particular segment of knowledge. As Torsten Hägerstrand (1991) reminded us, science is primarily concerned with what is invariant throughout the universe, and its purviews are necessarily specialized rather than concerned with how the various phenomena on the Earth's surface connect with one another to create the environments in which people live. As urban morphologists we can claim no such absolutism. For analytical purposes we may focus on a particular category of phenomena in the landscape, such as street pattern, architectural form or building materials, but we need to keep in view the landscape as an integrated entity. The investigation of urban landscape units, or townscape units as Conzen (1975) termed them, is an example of how this can be achieved: it is an inherently integrated approach to understanding urban form that has major, though still largely unrealized, potential in planning practice. Contributions to *Urban Morphology* that investigate other such integrations or in different ways pursue comparative thought, particularly across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries, are especially welcome.

References

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