

The problem of Euro-American myopia

The problem of anglophone squint – that distorted vision that filters out views foreign to the anglophone world – has recently begun to receive greater recognition, albeit long overdue.¹ ISUF has been in the vanguard of organizations seeking, and to some extent finding, remedies. In the first 10 years of publication of *Urban Morphology*, 56 per cent of authors of full-length articles were based in non-anglophone countries (very closely mirroring the geographical distribution of ISUF's membership in recent years) and 64 per cent of full-length articles that were region-specific were predominantly or entirely about non-anglophone parts of the world.

There is, however, a related widespread problem. This might be dubbed Euro- American myopia – the restriction of vision to matters European and North American. In addressing this problem ISUF has so far been much less successful. Only a handful of articles and viewpoints in *Urban Morphology* have emanated from, or been concerned with, areas outside Europe and North America. This partly reflects the fact that ISUF began as a coming together of European and American urban morphologists, largely the former. It has been compounded by the fact that hitherto all its conferences have been in Europe or the United States, again largely the former.

Membership of ISUF and usage of its website are less Euro-American than contributions to *Urban Morphology*. In April 2006, there were members of ISUF in 15 Asiatic countries and 25 per cent of members were based outside Europe and North America, a marginally higher percentage than 2 years earlier. These figures accord with those for visits to the ISUF website; 27 per cent over the period 2002-6 having been from outside Europe and North America. The problem for *Urban Morphology*, therefore, is not only that very large areas of the world outside Europe and North America are very weakly represented – including heavily urbanized parts of Asia, South America and Africa – but also that they are under-represented relative to the geographical distribution of ISUF members and website usage.

As always, such facts need to be viewed in a wider context. Euro-American myopia is far from being just an *Urban Morphology* or ISUF problem. It is a malady of numerous journals published in English, including a great many that purport to be international: journals in the social sciences and humanities have an especial problem, most of them carrying relatively few articles from or about areas outside North America and anglophone Europe. Under-representation of countries outside Europe and North America is apparent well beyond the world of publications. Within fields cognate to *Urban Morphology*, it exists in the activities of a host of organizations. It is evident, for example, in the activities of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (for instance in the geographical distribution of countries represented on its International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages), in the distribution of members of the International Federation for Housing and Planning, and in the distribution of urban sites inscribed on the World Heritage list (which has a high concentration in Europe in comparison with other areas of the world that have a high incidence of historic urban sites, such as parts of Asia).

A number of steps are being, or have been, taken by ISUF in attempts to increase the representation and participation of parts of the world outside Europe and North America. The annual conference in 2007 will be in Ouro Preto, Brazil and venues under discussion for conferences in 2008 and 2009 include North Africa and China. In this issue of *Urban Morphology* (pp. 43-58) Annalinda Neglia explores a Middle Eastern city. There is also a very direct call for greater attention to the non-Western world in Manu Sobti's viewpoint (this issue, pp. 65-6). He urges us to step outside the comfortable confines of the West. His plea is persuasive and it can be supported by cogent arguments.

It is time we woke up to the fact that cities exist widely over the surface of the Earth and most of that surface is outside Europe and North America. It is not only a matter of seeking to understand and appreciate the remarkable diversity of urban forms, past and present, outside the West. Just as important are the benefits to be derived from the comparisons with European and North American cities that stepping outside the West makes possible. For those whose interests remain in Euro-America, there is the better understanding of that minority part of the world that can be derived from viewing it from outside.

Note

1. Whitehand, J.W.R (2005) 'The problem of anglophone squint', *Area* 37, 228-30.

J.W.R. Whitehand