

Urban morphology and policy: bridging the gap

The weak relationship between research and practice is an acknowledged problem in a number of fields. In urban morphology it has been drawn attention to several times in this journal.¹ One aspect of the problem is the tendency in various fields for academic research and policy - whether of local or national government, or at a supranational level - to exist in largely separate worlds. This is to some extent 'institutionalized' in that organizations are often either largely to do with research and scholarship (predominantly learned or scientific societies) or mainly concerned with public and/or private practice.

Though ISUF purports to bridge the divide, in that 'it seeks to advance research and practice', the number of its members who are primarily academics is much greater than the number who have a major commitment to practice, and the latter are predominantly from the Latin world and the discipline of architecture. The tendency for memberships of organizations to be overwhelmingly either of academics, on the one hand, or policy makers and practitioners from outside academe, on the other, is evident in other fields substantially concerned with the built environment. For example, most of the members of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) are from outside academe, whereas the European Association for Urban History is mainly comprised of academics.

The often largely separate realms of communication that accompany such groupings become very evident to individuals crossing the boundaries between them. Those who work, at least some of the time, at the interface between research on the one hand and practice and policy on the other will no doubt be reminded of striking examples. For academic researchers, it is revealing to present urban morphology to groups that deal with urban form from essentially policy and practice standpoints. Important parts of the UNESCO World Heritage Cities programme overlap substantially with the interests of urban morphologists, yet a recent keynote presentation of urban morphological research at a UNESCO workshop on historic urban landscapes,² though at a basic level and most of it published long ago, was a fresh perspective for the policy- and practiceorientated audience. This was despite the shift in the World Heritage Cities Programme away from a concentration on the preservation of individual sites and monuments towards a broader approach to the conservation of historic urban landscapes - an approach that deals with much the same elements of urban form that are in the mainstream of historicomorphological research.

Attempts to bring the worlds of research and policy closer have been numerous. They have taken various forms; the enlisting of academics in advisory roles being one; government sponsored reviews of research, such as that in the mid-1980s by the French government in the case of urban morphology,³ being another. In the United Kingdom, government funding of research through research councils has been accompanied by increasing emphasis on the need to communicate research findings to potential non-academic users. A recent report to the Economic and Social Research Council on a cross-cultural application of urban morphological theory⁴ reflects the standard requirement by that body that the names and contact details be listed of non-academic research users with whom the research has been discussed or to whom its results have been disseminated. Yet the gap between research and policy remains pronounced in our field, as in others.

The problem seems to reside with both researchers and policy makers. While invitations to individuals to cross the boundary between these two groups and speak about the perspective from their side of the divide are to be welcomed, these rarely secure significant meetings of minds. For the most part, the allimportant follow-ups in terms of joint discussions are either perfunctory or fail to occur or, where they do occur, they fail to lead to benefits to policy. This tends to be the case, in my experience, whether at local, national or supranational levels. There are, however, notable successes in achieving boundary crossings; Tony Hall's accomplishments at a local level being an example.⁵ And these merit close examination in the search for ways of breaking down barriers.

At the supranational level at which ISUF particularly functions, the problems of lubricating the communications between research, policy and practice, and, most importantly, promoting synergies, are compounded by the major challenges of crossing linguistic and cultural divides. But that is a reason for redoubling efforts, not for resigning ourselves to inaction in the face of intractable problems. ISUF conferences provide opportunities of which greater advantage should be taken. But more than keynote addresses are required. We need to understand the processes of interaction and non-interaction between research and policy, and plan our discussions accordingly. We also need to consider organizing joint meetings with practice- and policy-orientated bodies. For example, in the case of historicomorphological topics, collaborations with ICOMOS, particularly its International Committee on Historic

Towns and Villages, and with those involved in the UNESCO World Heritage Cities Programme could be usefully explored.

The Council of ISUF welcomes members', and non-members', contributions on this topic, either as personal communications to the Secretary-General or as potential 'viewpoints' (which should be sent to the Editor) for consideration for publication in *Urban Morphology*.

Notes

1. See, for example, McGlynn, S. and Samuels, I. (2000) 'The funnel, the sieve, and the template: towards an operational urban morphology', *Urban Morphology* 4, 79-89.
2. Whitehand, J. W. R. (2007) 'Urban morphology and historical urban landscapes', unpublished keynote presentation to the Regional Workshop on Historic Urban Landscapes, organized by UNESCO in St Petersburg, Russia, 29 January - 2 February.
3. Choay, F. and Merlin, P. (eds) (1986) *A propos de la morphologie urbaine Rapport pour le Ministère de l'Urbanisme, du Logement et des Transports (Institut d'Urbanisme de l'Academie de Paris, Université de Paris VIII, Paris)*.
4. Whitehand, J. W. R. (2007) *Urban morphology: a cross-cultural exploration of theory: full research report ESRC End of Award Report, RES-000-22-0730 (ESRC, Swindon) (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk>)*.
5. Hall, T. (2007) *Turning a town around: a proactive approach to urban design (Blackwell, Oxford)*.

J.W.R. Whitehand