

Taking a world view

Central to the founding purposes of this journal was the dissemination of internationally-significant research and practice in urban morphology. A review of the contents of *Urban Morphology* since its inception reveals that the majority of them have relevance beyond the boundaries of individual countries. This sometimes reflects the geographical scope of the subject matter, but it also relates to the wide relevance of concepts and methods, even though their consideration in a particular paper may be limited to a single city. However, truly world coverage of a topic is, not surprisingly, relatively uncommon: rarely is the knowledge of a given author or group of authors sufficiently extensive to permit such a wide conspectus.

One reason for this condition is inherent in the subject matter of urban morphology; namely the sheer diversity of urban form – this is sometimes the case even within small areas, not to mention the diversity that exists at a world scale. A further reason is the nature and magnitude of the relevant literature, which is diverse and strewn widely, not only geographically but in many languages and types of publication. Only a small fraction of it is readily accessible worldwide. Nearly 30 years ago, Harris and Fellman (1980) compiled an inventory of 3445 geographical serials from 107 countries in 55 languages: the majority of those serials might, from their titles, contain contributions to urban morphology, and many certainly do. If to this is added the fact that only a fraction of journal contributions on urban morphology and related topics occur in geographical serials, as distinct from those in other disciplines, the task for any individual to encompass just the literature in serial form is enormous. As if this were not enough, there is the huge amount of relevant material that appears in books and other non-serial form – probably even larger, perhaps much larger, than the amount in serials. Just coping with the diversity of types of citation to which this literature gives rise is time consuming enough, as those who contribute to the editing of this journal will testify, and no individual could possibly read more than a tiny fraction of what is cited.

Aspiring to a world view, *Urban Morphology* has found this large, heterogeneous environment to be a challenging one in which to establish itself. Maintaining a focus on the geographical scope and relevance of its contents beyond the particular cities and parts of cities discussed continues to be critical. Promulgating this perspective to potential contributors with diverse geographical, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds is far from straightforward. However, though the majority of urban morphological and related literature is, in spite of the revolution in information technology, still very limited in its visibility, *Urban Morphology* is well-established in the international bibliographies, albeit that these fall short of providing a truly world coverage. It has had a presence in the ISI Web of Knowledge since 2001. The fact that downloads from the journal have become a significant part of ISUF's website traffic is but one indicator of the increased awareness of the journal's contents.

If having a world view in a field such as urban morphology entails both worldwide geographical coverage and the use of concepts and methods of wide relevance, then this issue of the journal, like most of its predecessors, fulfils those criteria. Collectively, the articles and viewpoints deal with aspects of four continents. Arguably at least as important, most contributions make international comparisons, several of them cross-cultural ones, and virtually all utilize or make reference to concepts or methods, or both, that have wide applicability. A further indicator of internationality is the fact that the first languages of the authors who have contributed to this issue number no less than eight, with authors based in anglophone countries being a minority.

However, the purview is narrower than this quick analysis might suggest. The large majority of concepts and methods considered emanate from Europe and America; many of them from English-speaking countries. Furthermore, as editors of journals whose contributors do not have English as a first language are aware, translation into English of expressions formulated in another language can be exceedingly difficult if the nuances of the original are to be preserved. In short, the various contributions may seem to add up to something approaching a world view, but that view is to a major extent an Anglicized one.

To this caveat must be added a further ground for caution about the breadth of view that is being achieved, not only in the potential contributions that pass through the journal's editorial office, but in the literature of urban morphology more widely. This relates to the disparate nature of what is written. While certain conceptual frameworks recur, many contributions to the body of literature whose subject matter we term 'urban morphology', including papers that do not survive this journal's refereeing process, are individualistic to the point of being difficult or impossible to compare with one another. They are concerned with the particulars of individual places.

They largely lack reference to theoretical frameworks that would enable them to be connected so as to form the basis for a wider, integrated body of knowledge.

This last aspect of urban morphology as it is today provides a major challenge. Despite signal individual contributions, urban morphology has been slow to establish internationally a widely acknowledged set of principles pertaining to the composition of urban form. Comparative research is faced with a plethora of case studies that use different or, quite often, unspecified definitions. Much research fails to be cast in sufficiently general terms to allow effective links to be made to a wider literature. This is both a symptom and a cause of an intellectual climate that is insufficiently conducive of conceptual thinking. In assessing submissions to this journal, dealing with this shortcoming is a major consideration.

Reference

1. Harris, C. D. and Fellman, J. D. (1980) *International list of geographical serials* University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper 193 (Department of Geography, University of Chicago, Chicago) 3rd edn.

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