

Comparing studies of urban form

Comparison of the findings of different research projects is a major problem in most fields. In the social sciences, and especially in the humanities, projects are often designed with insufficient thought being given to how their findings may be related to those of other studies. In urban morphology, problems of comparison are made more difficult by the fact that research is undertaken within several disciplines and published in a great many languages. The frames of reference employed are very diverse. To many researchers, especially those working primarily within the humanities, it is in the nature of urban form that this should be so. Nevertheless, many strive for an approach closer to the model provided by the physical sciences. Some of the various standpoints that researchers take are represented in this issue of *Urban Morphology*. There is thus considerable concern in the pages that follow with the way in which urban form is conceptualized and the characteristics of a range of approaches to its investigation.

Comparative studies, of which that by Conzen (2009) is a notable recent example of international scope, are much needed in urban morphology. But the major problems of comparing the findings of the different types of study are insufficiently acknowledged, let alone addressed. Only in the case of a relatively small number of studies of a given type that adopt the same definitions and methods is there a reasonable prospect that reliable comparisons of findings can be made. What, if anything, can be done to minimize this limitation?

There is a strong case for expending more effort in seeking bases for wider comparisons. This should be done not just for studies of the same general type: there is a need also to seek ground shared by what are currently for the most part regarded as discrete types of study. Kropf addresses the task in this issue (pp. 105-20). He does so by comparing a number of existing types of study, particularly in terms of their concepts and methods. He seeks first, to identify the different phenomena that are the objects of urban morphological enquiry; secondly, to find an aspect common to all the approaches which can be used to co-ordinate different views in a rigorous way; and thirdly, to establish a composite view in which the different approaches support each other. He proceeds by examining four types of study – the spatial-analytical, the configurational (space syntax), the process-typological and the historico-geographical.

The basic problem that Kropf is wrestling with is inescapable if the desired outcome of research is rigorous comparison of findings. The challenges to be faced, however, relate not only to non-comparability of definitions, concepts and methods, but also, particularly in the case of cross-cultural comparisons, to differences in the sources of information employed. All these matters are, or should be, of concern to both researchers and practitioners.

Kropf's paper provides the setting for a range of 'viewpoints' that follow. The approaches discussed by Habraken (pp. 131-3) and Cataldi (pp. 140-3) have certain dimensions that overlap with one another to the extent that the insights of one can to some degree be reconciled with those of the other. For example, both deal with what Habraken terms 'physical hierarchies'. Indeed one of the key points that he makes is concerned with how hierarchies are differently composed in different cultures.

As we seek to address problems of comparability, other reminders and observations in this issue are salutary. Maffei (pp. 133-5) draws our attention to the fact that two approaches that tend to be thought of separately – the process-typological approach and the historico-geographical approach – actually have related antecedents. He notes the almost forgotten links in the 1930s between the typological work of Italian architects and that of their compatriots in geography, and cites evidence of Italian-British links at about that time. However, Lamb (pp.136-8) steers our thoughts in a direction that could scarcely be more different from Kropf's close examination of the various approaches to which many of us have become accustomed. Urban morphologists, he suggests, should actually be comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction!

Many of the issues in this debate span far beyond urban morphology, and hitherto their airing within this field has been relatively limited. The recent contents of the Editorial mailbox suggest that the present surge of interest in this topic will continue at least into the next issue of *Urban Morphology*.

Reference

Conzen, M. P. (2009) 'How cities internalize their former urban fringes: a cross-cultural comparison', *Urban Morphology* 13, 29-54.

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