

The problem of separate worlds

The importance of research at boundaries between fields of knowledge has received increased attention in recent decades. Yet, while prominence has been given to interdisciplinarity, at the same time unexplored gaps have come into existence as new specialisms have developed. Within the interdisciplinary field of urban morphology and kindred fields, the net result has been less integrated bodies of knowledge than those explored by our predecessors of the first half of the twentieth century. The opening up of gaps requiring exploration has occurred both within and between relevant disciplines. New specialities in terms of subject matter or approach or both have continued to multiply. There has been a tendency for these to become more rather than less separate over time, reflecting in some cases the very nature of the advances being made.

In the course of the development of research on urban form over the past half-century or so the emergence of a series of approaches is evident. Kropf¹ considers four of them: spatial analytical, configurational (space syntax), process typological and historicogeographical. One could add several more approaches or communities of interest, most of them older established and on the whole deriving more obviously from more traditional fields of knowledge – such as archaeology, architecture, history, architectural history, geography, landscape architecture, planning and urban design – each tending to have distinct patterns of intercommunication as revealed most obviously by the literature their authors cite.

The constraints of disciplines on literature awareness can be extreme. For example, the announcement of the Tenth International Conference on Urban History, just held in Ghent, prefaces the contents of one of the conference sessions with the claim that the physical form of the city has rarely been analysed ‘to throw light on how and why cities grow and evolve’.² Yet within geographical urban morphology such research is, and has for long been, central. And architects of the Caniggian school would be astonished to learn from the same announcement that in architectural studies ‘seldom have buildings and landscapes been examined with a view to contributing to understanding the changing nature of towns and cities’.

Such lack of awareness of relevant work in other disciplines is compounded by language barriers. These are more pronounced in urban morphology, in company with the social sciences and humanities more generally, than in the physical sciences. This relates in part to the lesser dominance of the English language in urban morphology compared with the physical sciences. It also relates to the tendency for researchers to investigate urban form within their own country.

This journal has attempted to build bridges between the various communities of interest, whether spanning languages, countries, disciplines or some other aspect of specialization. In the case of languages, this has been successful in so far as some 61 per cent of the articles published since the journal began are by authors whose first language is not English, but the proportion of articles by authors based outside Europe and North America is only about 13 per cent. The disciplines represented are diverse: architects, geographers and planners are the most numerous of the authors of articles, but history is underrepresented. Of the four specialisms that Kropf singled out for consideration, the spatial analytical and the configurational are notable for their weak representation.

It would be unrealistic to expect any journal to integrate fully the various separate worlds that built-environment researchers and practitioners inhabit. However, in this issue of Urban Morphology there are several contributions that combine, or consider the potential of combining, approaches that have hitherto had largely separate existences. Griffiths et al. combine Conzenian and space syntax approaches to the analysis of urban form (pp. 85-99), and conclude that the relationship between suburban built form and socioeconomic activity is both configurational and historical in nature. Stanilov considers the reciprocal benefits to be derived from linking urban modelling more closely with urban morphology (pp. 123-4). He argues that combining knowledge of land-use dynamics derived from urban modelling with knowledge of town plan and building typology gained from morphological analysis could be critical in developing understanding of how cities grow and change. He also envisages urban modelling as a medium for strengthening the place of urban morphology in the management of the built environment beyond its role in conservation. This standpoint is rather different from that adopted by Samuels (pp. 121-3). He makes the case for greater integration, but his focus is on the link between historical area assessment and urban morphology. His concern is that so much in urban morphological research that is fundamental to understanding places is not being taken advantage of by those seeking to establish principles and methods for conserving historical urban landscapes.

These contributions consider only a small fraction of the gaps, some of them chasms, between communities of interest concerned with urban form. Further contributions to the journal seeking to strengthen the bridges described here, or pursue linkages between other communities of interest concerned with the built environment, are welcome.

Notes

1. Kropf, K. (2009) 'Aspects of urban form', *Urban Morphology* 13, 105-20.
2. European Association for Urban History, Tenth International Conference on Urban History (http://www.eauh2010.ugent.be/sessions?sess_code=S01) accessed 8 July 2010.

J.W.R. Whitehand