

Positioning *Urban Morphology*

From its inception *Urban Morphology* has been inherently international and multidisciplinary, publishing on research and practice across the spectrum of urban morphology. As is evident from the contents of this issue, contributions to the journal from a wide range of countries and language areas continue to be a feature.

Accompanied by an increasingly wide circulation, this is helping to fulfil the international objectives with which the journal started. Now in its fifteenth year, it is timely to consider the extent to which and the ways in which it is relating to the wider literature, including other periodicals, and connecting to debates elsewhere on the built environment. On what topics and parts of the world is it particularly contributing? Are there gaps in its coverage that it should be seeking to fill?

One obvious means of shedding light on the position the journal is coming to occupy within the world of research and communication is through one or more of the bibliographical databases. Having just completed 10 years of indexing in the ISI Web of Knowledge, its relationship to other journals is becoming apparent from the data available from that source. If the number of citations of articles in *Urban Morphology* by articles in other journals is indicative, the individual journals most closely related to *Urban Morphology* are *Urban Design International and Environment and Planning B*. However, the academic discipline with the largest number of journals citing the contents of *Urban Morphology* is geography. By the same measure, architecture is a minor citing discipline, but this reflects at least in part the relatively small number of journals in that field indexed in the ISI Web of Knowledge.

As is the case with journals across a wide range of disciplines, the most cited articles in *Urban Morphology* tend to be those that consider a broad aspect of the field, including a number that review the study of urban form in one of the countries in which the subject has a considerable history. Of the articles that focus on more specific or specialized topics, the most cited brings together one of the earliest topics to attract urban morphologists – the analysis of medieval built form – and two of the latest investigative tools – Global Positioning Systems and Geographical Information Systems (*Lilley et al.*, 2005).

The incidence of citations in the many journals not indexed in the ISI Web of Knowledge, many of them in languages other than English, remains largely uninvestigated, and rectifying this would require a sizeable piece of research. However, as the number of articles in *Urban Morphology* by authors for whom English is not their first language increases, it is to be hoped that there is broadening awareness of the journal's contents. The fact that *Urban Morphology* is now received in some 50 countries is an indication that this may be so.

Judging by the disciplines and professions of individual subscribers, as indicated by their addresses, the journal is very diverse in its readership. The most strongly represented disciplines are architecture, geography and planning, in that order, followed by urban design and a number of activities concerned with aspects of the environment. History, archaeology, conservation and heritage are small minority fields, and there are numerous other activities with a tiny representation. These disciplinary affiliations are broadly the same as those of the authors of articles in the journal.

Such statistics help to position the journal, but they leave unanswered a number of important questions. One of these relates to the conceptual frameworks employed by authors in relation to the great diversity of urban forms worldwide. By any reasonable measure, the urban areas of non-Western countries comprise a very large and increasing proportion of the world's total urban area. Yet most urban morphological research, judged by publications, is about Western cities. And, not surprisingly, most urban morphological concepts with the widest currency are grounded in that Western research, much of it only available in the English language.

To what extent are these concepts, and the methods of which they are products, appropriate when applied in the much larger nonWestern world? The search for the answer to this question is still only in its infancy. It is being pursued in several ways. One is the translation of key publications. For example, *Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in townplan analysis* (Conzen, 1960) has just appeared in Chinese (Song et al., 2011) and a Chinese translation of *Composizione architettonica e tipologia edilizia 1: lettura dell'edilizia di base* (Caniggia and Maffei, 1979) is in preparation. But, translation on its own, though an important aid, is not enough. It needs to be built on in the form of substantive cross-cultural research. Fortunately this is occurring, albeit on a limited scale relative to the huge task ahead. In *Urban Morphology* there are examples of the application of Western concepts in China (see, for example,

this issue, pp. 5-20) and of other bridges between East and West (see, for example, Kim, 2003). Significantly, membership of ISUF is growing rapidly in China, albeit from a low base, but is still minimal in the Indian subcontinent and practically all of Africa. And, despite the formation of national and regional ISUF networks, none exist as yet in non-Western countries.

A further question relates to the topics covered in *Urban Morphology* and the ways they are approached. Urban morphologists and *Urban Morphology* have tended to be concerned with enduring attributes and concepts of urban form. The latest fashions, whether in research or in urban form itself, have figured less prominently. If predilections are apparent, they are more for the constituents, origins, processes and shapers of urban form than for how urban form is perceived and represented, or indeed its effects. The themes of the next two ISUF conferences – ‘Urban morphology and the post-carbon city’ and ‘New urban configurations’ – may well attract contributions that have much in common with fields in which contemporary and popular issues have had greater prominence.

One of the major tasks is to cast more penetrating light on the way in which understanding urban form can have wider value: how it can, for example, inform and give direction to the way in which current challenges that face societies can be met. An especial need is for greater appreciation of how understanding the composition, origins, processes and shapers of urban form can strengthen urban planning. This entails not only enhancing the conservation and regeneration of existing urban environments but improving the ways in which entirely new urban areas are brought into existence and the quality of the new environments that result.

References

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