

Learning the language of urban morphology

Two matters of recent coffee-break discussion among urban morphologists deserve more systematic attention. The first is the problem that those at the margins of the field, not least potential new entrants, encounter in 'getting up to speed' with basic concepts and methods. The second is the weak relationship between research and practice. Both reflect a rather impervious contact face between urban morphology and fields of knowledge and application on its borders. In particular, channels of communication are ill-developed between, on the one hand, the research frontier and, on the other, knowledge users (in such fields as planning) and new researchers.

For researchers new to the field there is a paucity of books that bring together the various facets of urban morphology. One of the very few publications that is unambiguously an urban morphology textbook is *Morphologie urbaine* by Rémy Allain (2004), but this is still only available in French.

A quarter of a century ago, Françoise Choay and Pierre Merlin (1986) solicited contributions to a compilation on urban morphology by a dozen international experts, an important aim being to draw together some of the main threads in the field. But it turned out that 'everyone seemed to be discussing something different and there was little common ground or methodological base, quite apart from language problems' (Samuels, 1990, p. 433). The products of this enquiry were published in French only (see also Merlin *et al.*, 1988).

In this issue (pp. 161-2) Teresa MaratMendes draws attention to and reflects on the few glossaries and similar works dealing partly or wholly with the field of urban morphology that have subsequently been produced. The problem, as she points out, is that their coverage is partial or out of date. Larkham and Jones's (1991) *A glossary of urban form* is now 20 years old.

Major difficulty stems from the fact that urban morphology is a small part of several disciplines, and has a place in many different cultures, languages and countries. The Internet provides access to a remarkable array of material but little coherent guidance can be extracted by either newcomers seeking to delineate the field as a basis for finding their own way in it or practitioners wishing to make use of its methods and findings. This is not to deny that there have been, since Merlin and Choay's publications of the 1980s, numerous published statements reviewing developments in urban morphology, including integrative treatments. In this journal alone there have been a number, including one by Eckart Ehlers in this issue (pp. 97-119). However, the majority relate to particular countries or schools of thought. Furthermore, it is in their nature that their appeal is more to established researchers within the field than to those looking in from the margins or practitioners wishing to apply the findings of research for their professional purposes.

Karl Kropf (this issue, pp. 157-61) identifies some of the characteristics of urban morphology that make communication difficult between different interest groups, not just academics and practitioners but also different groups with a vested interest in the actual urban forms that urban morphologists study, such as developers and the public. He discusses the different 'languages', especially vocabularies, that different groups employ. Thus, if they wish to communicate outside their specialism, the task for urban morphologists, whether new or old, entails not only understanding the terminology of their field but being able to translate it into the 'languages' of non-academic groups and, it might be added, sometimes other academic groups!

In light of these problems, the President of ISUF has set up a task force to create an online didactic 'morphopedia', or urban-morphological lexicon (see this issue, p. 120). Initial discussions of this proposal have helped to stimulate thinking about setting up a further task force, on the related challenge of improving the relationship between urban morphological research and practice. An initial meeting on 'Urban morphology and conservation: research and practice', sponsored by ISUF and hosted by the Urban Morphology Research Group, took place in Birmingham, UK on 13 September 2011. The proceedings of this meeting will be reported in the next issue of *Urban Morphology*.

References

- Allain, R. (2004) *Morphologie urbaine: géographie, aménagement et architecture de la ville* (Armand Colin, Paris).

- 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'Académie de Paris, Université de Paris VIII, Paris).
- Larkham, P. J. and Jones, A. N. (1991) *A glossary of urban form* Historical Geography Research Series 26 (Institute of British Geographers, London).
- Merlin, P. Choay, F. and D'Alfonso, E. (eds) (1988) *Morphologie urbaine et parcellaire: colloque d'Arcet-Senans, 28 et 29 octobre 1985* (Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Paris).
- Samuels, I. (1990) 'Architectural practice and urban morphology', in Slater, T. R. (ed.) *The built form of Western cities: essays for M. R. G. Conzen on the occasion of his eightieth birthday* (Leicester University Press, Leicester) 415-35.

J.W.R. Whitehand