

Thinking cross-culturally

One of the great issues and challenges of the twenty-first century is the future of the world's various cultures. As major embodiments of culture, the physiognomies of cities should therefore be a high priority for debate and research. In a journal such as *Urban Morphology* it might seem needless to emphasize this. But what is actually being discussed at international conferences on urban studies, architecture, planning and urban design, and published in the mainstream literature of these fields, suggests that there is insufficient recognition of this priority in research and practice.

Undoubtedly ISUF has contributed to the bringing together of researchers and practitioners from various cultures. Though India and Africa continue to be very underrepresented, research emanating from different cultural regions has been, and continues to be, presented at ISUF's conferences and in contributions to this journal. But, within publications that might be judged 'international' by their presence in major libraries around the world, how well are the various cultural regions represented in studies of urban form? The answer is that the Western world, especially the English-speaking part of it, dominates overwhelmingly. And this is true of both the places from which authors emanate and the cities that are examined (Whitehand, 2012, pp. 58-9). Furthermore, *cross*-cultural studies have been few despite the widespread European colonial presence and its legacies (including detailed mapping of urban forms) within so many different cultural regions.

The most significant exception to the paucity of urban form studies of non-Western cities is the work of German-speaking researchers. Ehlers (2011) summarizes the products of this work, which has yielded models of cities in parts of the world as diverse as Russia, Mediterranean Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, India and China. He draws attention to the challenge of evaluating, for present and future societies, the historical traditions of culturally-differentiated urban forms (Ehlers, 2011, p. 114).

More generally, however, cross-cultural perspectives are not well developed. Yet comparison of the urban forms of different cultural regions can both increase understanding of particular forms and, most importantly, contribute to the construction of a more general framework to which the characteristics of individual cultures can be related. A small step towards this ambitious objective, albeit limited to a particular type of town, has been the comparison of Japanese and English castle towns (Conzen, 2004, pp. 168- 85; Satoh, 2008, pp. 133-5).

Cross-cultural research can take various forms. Frequently two or more cultures are embedded in a single city. Dufaux (2000, pp. 9-19) has demonstrated how different cultures can be reflected within individual building structures, illustrating this in relation to the hybrid (French and English) characteristics of Montréal's tenements. Ehlers (2011, p. 114) reminds us of larger-scale hybridizations such as those evident at cultural 'crossroads', the Mediterranean region being a striking melting pot of antiquity, Islam and the 'West'. The application of methods honed in one culture can often be applied successfully in another, as argued by He and Henwood (2011, pp. 82-4) and elsewhere in this issue by Chen (pp. 133- 48) and Xu (pp. 167-9).

In many cases cities embody not only different cultural influences, but also several periods in the development of those cultures. Most cities are so complex as to provide huge challenges to attempts at modelling. However, cross-cultural comparisons can often be facilitated, sometimes across many cities, by limiting the number of variables considered; for instance, by concentrating on a process, period, theme or form of governance. Conzen (2009), for example, achieves an almost worldwide conspectus in his focus on fringe belts.

A feature of the few attempts that have been made to explore urban form cross-culturally is the prominence of approaches, concepts and methods developed in Europe. In the last few years the thinking of the Conzenian and Muratorian schools in particular has been applied in China and its dissemination within that country is likely to be increased by the translation into Chinese of Conzen's town-plan analysis of Alnwick (Song *et al.*, 2011) and, within the next year or so, Caniggia and Maffei's *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* (2001). The early results of such work suggest that these cross-cultural applications have much to commend them (Conzen *et al.*, 2012; Gu *et al.*, 2008).

However, as such applications increase there is a need to guard against the misinterpretation of non-Western cultures by viewing them through a Western lens. Lee (1999), for example, has drawn attention to the fundamental difference between Western and Oriental conceptions of the relationship between buildings and the spaces in which they are located. In light of the widespread impact of Western, particularly American, forms in cities in so many parts of the world, it would be perverse if enthusiasm for research approaches developed in the West gave impetus to the winds of worldwide cultural Americanization. The dissemination of effective means of understanding urban form honed in the West is important but not at the cost of cultural homogenization. This is a major consideration in relation to the formidable task of conserving the legacies of the world's rich diversity of urban forms.

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