

Urban morphological research and practice

The interconnection of research and practice in urban morphology has strong roots within ISUF. Indeed this relationship is integral to the Muratorian thinking of the mid-twentieth century that was to become a major underpinning of the foundation of ISUF. Contributions to this journal have continued to both explore the relationship and communicate examples of its application in a variety of environments. Nevertheless, there has been concern among urban morphologists in recent years that fundamental research in their field is receiving insufficient attention in planning practice. It may seem self-evident that the production of new urban forms and, even more obviously, the modification and conservation of existing ones should be grounded on an understanding of present urban forms and their past development. But in reality this elementary requirement frequently remains unfulfilled.

The poor integration of pure and applied knowledge is a problem in the social sciences and humanities more widely. Within urban morphology it has recently been formally acknowledged in the setting up of an ISUF Task Force on research and practice (Samuels, this issue, pp. 40-3). This has followed hard on the heels of a theme issue of *Built Environment* on 'Urban morphology and design' (see, for example, Çaltışkan and Marshall, 2011) and an international round table of urban planners on the relationship between academia and practice (see, for example, Bell, 2012).

In seeking to achieve an improved interrelation of research and planning practice internationally, a major problem for the ISUF Task Force is the great international diversity of not only urban morphological research but also the various aspects of urban design and planning. Unfortunately, the continuing series of articles in *Urban Morphology* on the study of urban form in different countries still falls well short of providing a world conspectus of research, and it offers even less basis for generalization about the relationship of research to practice. It does seem, however, that within parts of the world in which there has been a growth in the extent to which the physical form of urban areas has become a significant subject of planning, it has not necessarily followed that urban morphological research has had greater impact. For example, consideration of urban form is more fashionable in British planning now than for many years but the *study* of urban form has percolated only very slowly into that country's planning profession.

Given ISUF's explicitly international remit, the great geographical variety of planning systems is an especial challenge. The contrast between the systems in the United States and the United Kingdom and between these and that of China are among the more obvious. There is considerable variation too in the extent to which urban morphology is part of education. It is a common part of training in architecture in France, Italy and Spain but is well outside the mainstream of architectural education in the anglophone countries. Such contrasts reflect differences in the extent of interdisciplinary links. Connections between architecture and geography, for example, are very weak in the United Kingdom. An illustration of this is the special issue of the *British Journal of Architecture* in 2012 (Volume 17, Number 5) on 'Townscape revisited'. It largely relates to the United Kingdom but it contains almost no overlap with discussions in the urban morphological literature on townscapes in that country that have a long history in the discipline of geography.

It is particularly disconcerting that some of the gaps between research and practice relate to findings embedded in the literature of urban morphological research long ago. The implications for urban planning of the markedly different degrees of persistence of street systems, building form and land use emphasized by the doyen of geographical urban morphology M. R. G. Conzen in the 1960s have received little consideration in the planning profession, including in his own country. More widely it is still not uncommon for planning to focus on land use, with ground plan and building forms receiving comparatively little attention (Hall, this issue, pp. 54-5).

Understanding the way in which urban form has developed should be fundamental to urban design (Scheer, this issue, p. 49). Comprehending the physical substance or 'working material' of which cities have been and are being made is a foundation for the creation of high quality urban areas (Kropf, 2011, pp. 404-7). However, 'copying and pasting' an existing form is a risky design strategy unless it stems from *understanding* of how such form has arisen (Çaltışkan and Marshall, 2011, p. 419) and how it relates to the morphogenesis of the environment in which it is inserted.

The socio-economic milieu in which research and practice are undertaken is a crucial factor in their interplay. In China research on urban form goes hand in glove with planning practice. For most academics in that country achieving a viable income, both personal and for research, is dependent on planning consultancy (Feng, this issue, pp. 55- 6). The problem, however, in a working environment propelled in this way, is that opportunities for practice drive research unduly. There is too little time for academics to devote to independent thought on the fundamentals of urban morphology.

This is not to suggest that the direction of the relationship is or should be purely one way. In a fertile interrelationship of research and practice, understanding gained from the experience of practice can contribute to the advancement of morphological theory (O'Connell, this issue, p. 53). Planning is not only a means of creating urban form; it is also a means of understanding it (Cataldi, this issue, p. 57). Conversely theories of urban design need to be informed by theories of urban change (Marshall and Çalıřkan, 2011, p. 420). Hence urban design and urban morphology can feed on one another – they can be mutually supportive (Nasser, this issue, p. 50). The urban designer must learn from successful outcomes that are not necessarily the products of deliberate design.

Whether it be the conservation of a historical environment or the creation of an entirely new city, the relationship between urban morphological research and practice is fundamental to the built environments of an increasing majority of the world's population. For ISUF to generate significantly greater awareness of this among practitioners so diverse in their backgrounds and, inevitably, in many cases committed to particular disciplinary and organizational frameworks is a major task. The lubrication of existing lines of communication and the creation of new ones are clearly part of this task. Perhaps researchers should take encouragement, however, from the fact that one of the most forthright cases for urban morphology as an underpinning of planning practice is provided by a practitioner (McCormack, this issue, pp. 45-8). A number of contributors to this issue of *Urban Morphology* articulate in particular *what* needs to be achieved. Ivor Samuels, chairman of the Task Force, welcomes both further contributions on this and especially on *how* it can be done.

References

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