

Editorial comment

ISUF after 20 years: *reculer pour mieux sauter*

This year ISUF celebrates its twentieth birthday. Its first meeting in 1994 brought together what were seen by a number of researchers at the time as three 'schools' of urban morphology, each of which was grounded in the work of a particular individual or group: one was associated with the Anglo-German geographer M. R. G. Conzen, another with the Italian architect Saverio Muratori (and later his compatriot Gianfranco Caniggia), and the third with a group of French-speaking architects mainly working in Versailles.

Central to the aspirations of the founders of ISUF was to promote dialogue between the adopters of the different approaches to the study of urban form that had developed during the middle and later years of the twentieth century. A major aim was to overcome a fragmentation of both research and practice that was in significant part a product of the isolation of work that was being undertaken in different languages and disciplines. The bridge-building initially envisaged was primarily between the language 'worlds' of English, French, Italian and German, and between the disciplines of geography and architecture. The importance of fostering this process was recognized by Anne Vernez Moudon, the first Secretary-General of ISUF and later its first President. She was instrumental in bringing together in Lausanne, Switzerland what were to become the founder members of the organization.

There were of course a number of harbingers of ISUF's foundation. Indeed quite recently Maffei (2009) has drawn attention to relationships that were evident much earlier between different approaches to urban form that were to come together within ISUF, notably relationships between Anglo-German and Italian thinking about settlement forms, and links between Italian architects and geographers. However, though much has been written in recent years about publications that were formative in the development of the

Conzenian and Muratorian/Caniggian approaches, their affinities were slow to be seriously explored. Despite key publications by both incipient schools between the 1950s and 1970s, it was not until 1982, at an international conference in Birmingham, UK organized by the University of Birmingham's Urban Morphology Research Group (founded in 1974), that their commonalities were focused on explicitly (Samuels, 1983, p. 6). Even so, as late as 1985, in an international survey of urban morphology, the continuing strength of language barriers was striking (Merlin *et al.*, 1988). In a publication based on the proceedings of a further conference in Birmingham, in 1990, this problem and the need for inter-disciplinarity were clearly acknowledged, but the line of Italian research developed by Muratori and Caniggia received little more than passing mentions (Whitehand and Larkham, 1992).

A quarter-century on, much has changed and in it ISUF has played a significant role. Its first major conference and the publication of the first issue of *Urban Morphology* in 1997, the same year as the First International Space Syntax Symposium, were key events. The selection of the first venue outside Europe, Cincinnati, for the eighth annual conference in 2001, the holding of the fourteenth annual conference in Brazil and the sixteenth in China reflected expansion into a worldwide network. The most recent conference in Australia has further underlined ISUF's international reach. There has also been the formation of Italian, Nordic, Portuguese, Chinese and, most recently, Turkish affiliated networks. The most recent conference of the Portuguese Network, in 2013, including no less than 153 presentations, was followed by publication of the first issue of its journal *Revista de Morfologia Urbana*.

One of the most notable changes has been the increase in the number of members from China. Unrepresented in early ISUF confer-

ences, in the last two China was among the two or three most represented countries, despite its great distance from the conference venues in the Netherlands and Australia.

These changes need to be viewed in a much wider context of change across a range of disciplines, of which the growing research significance of countries such as China and Brazil is only one facet. Just in the 20 years of ISUF's existence there have been significant changes in research foci and publication outlets within research fields that abut urban morphology. Within geography, an important discipline in the origins of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, the dominance of journals in the English language that had become evident well before the foundation of ISUF has become even more pronounced. At the same time the link of urban morphology to urban geography has become more tenuous: indeed the very field of urban geography has shifted from the core position within human geography that it occupied in the 1960s to being less clearly identifiable as an entity, at least within anglophone academe. Such changes are if anything increasing the importance of the role that ISUF needs to play in ensuring that urban morphology receives due attention in a world in which an increasingly dominant proportion of human existence is becoming urban based and urban orientated.

This calls for a stocktaking of accomplishments and needed action that has significance far beyond the desirability of recognizing a notable anniversary within ISUF's short history. The need for such an assessment has to some extent been recognized within the past 3 years in the creation of a number of ISUF task forces. The Task Force on the Development of a Morphopedia aims to provide major enhancement of the urban morphological glossary on the ISUF website. The Task Force on Research and Practice in Urban Morphology has given rise to several initiatives, and both examples of specific applications of urban morphology and wider matters of related debate are included in this issue of the journal (Oliveira *et al.*, pp. 23-39; Talen, pp. 69-70).

But the tasks ahead extend well beyond the scope of current task forces. There is a need to clarify the structure of the field and its objects of study (Kropf, this issue, pp. 41-57, 70-2), and the ways in which these can be articulated (Marshall, this issue, pp. 73-5). Most importantly, this entails viewing the objects of investigation – the multitude of different urban structures and spaces – as much more than individual static forms: appreciation of urban forms as integrated entities is fundamental not only in research but also in practice.

At the same time much more *comparative* research needs to be done on the variety of ways of seeking to understand urban form. Arguably at this juncture the development of links between the various approaches to urban morphology, including some hitherto relatively weakly represented within ISUF, is as important as further development of individual approaches.

In respect of these and other matters for review and prospective action the Twenty-First International Seminar on Urban Form in Porto, Portugal has a particularly timely range of foci (this issue, p. 88). It promises to be a most appropriate occasion for both reflection on achievements to date and mapping the way forward.

References

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