

Editorial comment

The changing face of urban morphology: achievements and challenges

In the last few years, greater concern for both the clarification of objectives and the planning and accomplishment of change has become evident within ISUF. Such developments are of course occurring within a wider environment in which much change is unplanned. However, the contents of reports in this issue of the journal and other recent issues suggest that considerable progress is being made. Reports on website activity, *Urban Morphology*, national and international conferences, the development of networks and the funding of projects all have a healthy tenor. The auguries for the organization of ISUF and for the field of urban morphology would on the whole seem to be good.

Developments that have been in the offing for several years have been recently highlighted and reinforced by an exceptionally large, wide-ranging annual ISUF conference in Porto, Portugal. The call for papers for that event yielded 556 proposals which, after refereeing, were whittled down to provide an impressive programme of 388 papers. Seemingly, practically every major facet of urban morphology and every major inhabited region of the world were represented.

Change has been particularly evident in the geographical distribution of ISUF's membership. When the organization was founded its members were largely drawn from Europe. In fact in the course of urban morphology's much longer existence as an organized field of knowledge it has, until recent years, mainly been concentrated in Europe and North America. Despite ISUF's annual conference having returned this year to Europe, the majority of the authors of papers were from other parts of the world, though Africa and the Indian sub-continent continued to be markedly under-represented. That there was a strong Portuguese representation was unsurprising in light of the vigorous growth over the past 4 years of the Portuguese Network of Urban Morphology (now extended to include the entire Portuguese-speaking world). Perhaps more noteworthy was the fact that participants

from countries in which urban morphology has traditionally been strong were outnumbered by those from outside Europe, especially from Brazil and Eastern Asia (notably China), reinforcing a geographical shift that was already becoming apparent in several preceding conferences. In contrast, the major European 'homelands' of the field – Germany, France, the UK and Italy – had rather modest numbers of participants or, in the case of Germany and France, noticeably few. Even participants from North America were far fewer in number than those from Brazil. These changes have been mirrored by changes in the authorship of papers in *Urban Morphology*.

Accompanying this shift there have been corresponding changes in the topics and parts of the world that have received attention. Unsurprisingly, there has been a widening in the geographical spread of cities investigated. Changes in the substance being researched, however, have been somewhat less pronounced. In relation to 'schools of thought', there is some evidence of diversification and hybridization, though ISUF's founding foci remain strong. In terms of conceptual roots, those of the Muratorian school and the Conzenian school remain resilient, with research adopting these approaches having diffused widely. For example, in the case of the latter, work on the fringe-belt concept is in progress in Brazil, China, Morocco, Poland and Turkey, to name a few countries. Recent translations into other languages of key works in English and Italian are likely to further this process.

Yet against this background of change and undoubted achievements there is no shortage of challenges to be met. The conditions under which research in some parts of the world is being undertaken are far from ideal: many researchers are continuing to work in relative isolation, with very heavy dependence conceptually and methodologically on quite limited fields of contact. In many of these cases language barriers continue to be an

impediment to rapid dissemination.

There is also a continuing paucity of interactions between certain aspects of urban morphology and various adjacent fields. Admittedly work at the borders of urban morphology is on the whole increasing, and there are growing links with research on atmospheric science, ecology, health and, to a lesser extent, other fields, including transport (and other aspects of human movement, such as 'walkability'), criminology and social interaction. But, within any individual project, cross-disciplinary links, if they exist, tend understandably to be with just a small facet of one other discipline. More problematic is the fact that scarcely any of the linkage is to historico-geographical and architectural urban morphology. Research that builds on work on the historical development of urban form, for example connecting to morphological periods or the typological process, continues to be rare at the borders with neighbouring sciences. Most work on aspects of urban form by atmospheric scientists and ecologists, for example, treats the city as primarily a physical object here and now rather than as a historical, culturally-laden phenomenon.

Such problems prompt questions about the process by which urban morphology is developing as a body of knowledge. There is no doubt that the field is growing if judged by such measures as number of researchers, conference papers and publications. The extent to which this is being matched by enhanced understanding of urban form is harder to assess. It is perhaps timely to consider how much further forward we are now, for instance if judged by conceptual richness, than when ISUF was founded 20 years ago. There may be a large increase in research on the fringe-belt concept, for example, but is this matched by growing sophistication of the concept? To what extent are researchers doing more than pursuing other cases of much the same phenomena, albeit often in hitherto under-examined parts of the world, rather than giving prime attention to enhancing understanding?

These are provocative types of question. Attempts to address them, but usually indirectly, are to be found, for example, in a number of the national reviews of the study of urban form that have appeared in this journal. The nub of the matter is that the ability to imitate is a fundamental human asset but it is also a major bastion of stasis if used without discrimination. Building on past discoveries is inherent in progress but exploration of further examples needs imagination and selectivity. The recent flurry of translations of outstanding works of the past into other languages is an important development to build on, but we need to stand on the masters' shoulders rather than be satisfied with standing next to them.

As if extending the frontiers of knowledge were not a challenging enough task, there has been rapidly growing awareness of the need to expand the application of urban morphological research into practice. Much thought has been given over the past year or more to how this might be achieved. ISUF now has a charter, the Porto Charter, setting out its objectives, not least to focus on applications in urban planning practice, where ignorance of many aspects of urban morphological research is widespread. However, large gaps are being recognized in relation to applications in other fields, such as health, crime, transport, social interaction and governance. Achieving wider recognition of the problem of weak, sometimes negligible, applications in practice is a major task. As well as the need for advances in research, there are major educational challenges.

The manifestations of enthusiasm, energy and widening participation at the ISUF 2014 conference were heartening: on this and other evidence the organization and pursuit of urban morphology are undergoing a fascinating period of development. We look forward with anticipation to seeing evidence of major breakthroughs in both research and practice at the next conference, in Rome, in 2015.

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