

Editorial comment

Conservation, heritage and urban morphology

In recent issues of this journal much has been written about the relationship between research and practice in urban morphology. This has been stimulated in no small part by the setting up of the ISUF Task Force on the subject (Samuels, 2013). Its importance has been underlined by numerous contributors, not least with characteristic vehemence by McCormack (2013). After the flurry of 'viewpoints' on various facets of this topic, reflection on one aspect that has had a long, but rarely prominent, history is perhaps timely: the relationship between urban morphology and conservation.

It will shortly be the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Conservation and the city* by one of the leading researchers on urban morphology and conservation (Larkham, 1996), and the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of a key morphological contribution on the management of historical urban landscapes (Conzen, 1966). Since the appearance of these notable contributions to knowledge much ink has been spilled on various aspects of urban conservation, notably relating to the allied topic of 'heritage'. Much of the substance of what has become known as 'tangible' heritage consists of the historic parts of the urban landscapes that are the objects of investigation by urban morphologists. Indeed, it could be readily argued that urban morphology offers a substantial part of the fundamental research base that should logically be drawn upon in the recognition, delimitation and management of urban World Heritage sites. Yet, despite the burgeoning expenditure of energy on these activities, the urban morphological contribution to them has been meagre.

The scantness of this input is evident in the contents of 'a series of international expert meetings organized by UNESCO' on 'rethinking urban conservation principles and paradigms' (Bandarin, 2010, p. 3). The volume that was the outcome of this 'historic urban landscape initiative' (van Oers, 2010, p. 7) broadly reflects the range of advice sought by

the organizers: only one of ten contributors was an urban morphologist and, judging by the affiliations of authors, only two contributors were at the time of publication primarily academics. The limited research input to this publication should also be seen in a wider context. The direct representation of urban World Heritage in academe is small. The existence of a World Heritage Centre in Peking University within which urban morphologists have a major role is very unusual.

As advisory body to UNESCO on historic urban landscapes, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has had, and continues to have, a key part to play. And it is noteworthy that one of the very few ISUF members of that body has recently drawn attention to the need for ICOMOS to include links with urban morphology. He reminded us that 'numerous potential engagement points shout out for shared activity and development' (Sinding-Larsen, 2015, p. 92). The Coordinator of the UNESCO World Heritage Cities Programme at the time of the 'historic urban landscape initiative' was well aware of the need for change, though perhaps diplomatically cautious in some of his wordings on the subject. 'Slowly it seems that we are moving away from 19th and early 20th century concepts derived from the rather static approach to monuments preservation ... towards more dynamic processes' (van Oers, 2010, p. 13).

Five years on from that observation there seems little ground for optimism that significantly improved morphological bases for urban conservation are likely to be widely adopted in the near future. And this far from optimistic prospect applies to both the historic urban landscapes for which UNESCO has a decision-making role and the wide range of historical urban landscapes that contribute collectively to shaping human environments much more widely under the aegis of national and local governments. Prognosis is not easy, particularly in light of the great variation from

country to country in both the practice of urban conservation and entire planning systems (Hall, 2013, p. 55; Rodwell, 2009, p. 78). But it is hard to take any consolation from the fact that a recurrent feature is the weak grounding in fundamental morphological research.

It is a truism that we need to be well informed about what we are trying to conserve. In the case of urban landscapes, this means making the best possible use of sound methods, including morphological ones. It is paradoxical that the geographical boundaries of conservation areas are almost invariably given great emphasis by bodies concerned with planning, conservation and heritage; yet the basis of those boundaries, the areas they delimit, and consequently the management policies, have habitually been the subjects of inadequate morphological research.

As with the relationship of urban morphological research to practice more generally, in the case of urban conservation many factors surrounding the research-practice relationship influence actual outcomes on the ground. But the adoption of a sound research basis is indispensable.

Contributors to *Urban Morphology* have recognized, often in relation to urban design more generally, various aspects of the problems reflected on here. Poor international communication and inadequate coverage in higher education curricula are among the more strongly implicated underlying factors, and evidence of both is discussed in this issue (Ruiz-Apilánez *et al.*, 2015; Samuels, 2015). Both with regard to the urban morphology research-practice interrelation generally and specifically with regard to the pertinence of that interrelation to urban conservation, major problems need to be addressed. They merit high priority on ISUF's agenda.

References

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J. W. R. Whitehand