

Editorial comment

Recent changes in urban morphology

As we begin publication of the twentieth volume of this journal it is salutary to consider changes that have occurred in urban morphology as a field of knowledge since the foundation of ISUF just over 2 decades ago. Two changes are particularly evident. The first is growth in the size of the field. The second is its increasing diversity.

Growth can be measured in various ways. One of the cruder but most readily accomplished in this case is a tally of the number of documents (mainly articles, book reviews and reports) indexed in the Web of Science that use the term “urban morphology”. Of course changes over time (overwhelmingly increases) in the number and size of the sources of documents, mainly journals, covered by this database need to be borne in mind. Furthermore, the coverage is largely of publications in English. However, the number of indexed documents containing the term “urban morphology” increased from 26 in 1991–95 to 363 in 2011–15, more than doubling in successive 5-year periods from 1996–2000 to 2011–15 (Web of Science, All Databases, accessed 30 January 2016). This is almost certainly indicative of a significant increase in the actual amount of work undertaken.

Subject to similar caveats, an increase in diversity is suggested by the major increase in the range of journals carrying documents that contain the term “urban morphology”. In 1991–95 such documents were spread over just 21 different journals, with over half of them being in geography journals. Yet in the most recent full year, 2015, the number of journals containing such documents was roughly triple that in the 5-year period 1991–95. Similarly striking was the fact that the journals in which “urban morphology” occurred in 2015 were more diverse. They now ranged over such fields as acoustics, atmospheric science, architecture, art history, ecology, energy, planning, remote sensing, technology, transport and waste management. The journal *Urban Morphology* now carried

by far the most “urban morphology” documents of any single journal, about a quarter of the total, although many were short items. Geography journals contained much the same number of “urban morphology” documents as planning journals and only a few more than atmospheric science journals. That the architectural journals contained relatively few “urban morphology” documents reflects the fact that, with the exception of articles in *Urban Morphology*, most journal articles on this subject by architects are in journals published in languages other than English that are not indexed in the Web of Science.

In making these comparisons it is necessary to remind ourselves that the terms applied to fields of knowledge vary in their usage and connotations (Larkham, 2002). In the case of “urban morphology”, this is evident from examination of the contents of articles in the many different journals in which the term now appears. Even where the definition of urban morphology as the study of urban form appears to be similarly understood across a number of journals, both approaches and subject matter may vary considerably. Within atmospheric science, for instance, reference to historical changes in urban form are rare, as are those to the cultural bases of urban form that figure prominently in *Urban Morphology*. And, much closer to the mainstream of urban morphology as many members of ISUF would envisage it, the overlaps between, for example, the configurational, historico-geographical, process-typological and spatial-analytical approaches to the field tend to be quite limited.

In company with the expansion of urban morphology in the journal literature has been its growth in ISUF conferences. The increase since the early conferences in the number of papers proposed has been remarkable, on average far outstripping the accommodation that conference organizers have been able to provide for them. Moreover, as with journal articles, the actual contents of papers

have diversified. While the representation of ISUF's main founding schools of thought has increased, so have contributions from other standpoints and pursuing other themes. Indeed in some cases standpoints and topics are sufficiently lacking in links to ISUF's traditional core approaches as to make it desirable for conference organizers to programme sessions that explicitly link approaches that have hitherto largely been pursued separately.

The development and promotion of links between urban morphology and fields with which it has not traditionally been associated has become increasingly evident in the Viewpoints section of this journal: the links to research on energy and risk reduction are examples in this issue (see pp. 69–73). At the same time there has been reinforcement and extension of thinking that provided springboards for the founding of ISUF in 1994 (see, for example, this issue, pp. 66–9).

Though there continues to be considerable geographical diversity in both research and practice, a notable feature has been the spread of Western-rooted urban morphological ideas. However, it has been suggested that there are signs in China that there may be in the offing a resurgence in the importance attached to traditional settlement forms. In some instances this is being linked to the adoption of perspectives on conservation grounded in urban morphological approaches developed in Europe (this issue, pp. 65–6).

In reflecting on the very active recent phase in the development of urban morphology, it may also be timely to recognize the need for some deepening of historical awareness. It is apparent, not only from submissions of papers to ISUF conferences and this journal, but also from usage of the term “urban morphology” in a wide range of publications, that awareness of the roots of urban morphology is quite

limited. Many readers of *Urban Morphology* may well be surprised to learn that ‘urban morphology has presented significant intellectual challenges to mathematicians and physicists ever since the eighteenth century’ (Masucci *et al.*, 2015). And perhaps as many will be unaware of urban morphology's nineteenth-century roots in the work of geographers and historians (Ehlers, 2011; see also this issue, pp. 62–4).

As we look forward to completing the first 20 years of *Urban Morphology*, closer assessments of changes in this field of knowledge during that time-span would be timely, as would prospective views on the *next* 20 years. The Viewpoints section of the journal awaits such appraisals and prospectations. Furthermore, a longer backward look at the antecedents of urban morphology would also be appropriate. ‘If you want to know where you are going, you need to know where you have come from’. This aphorism is perhaps a useful starting point as we map the way forward.

References

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