

### Crossing boundaries: towards a more integrated approach?

On numerous occasions attention has been drawn in this journal to significant boundaries that exist both within urban morphology and at its margins with other fields. Attempts to cross boundaries between some of the approaches adopted in urban morphology, perhaps most notably between the spatial analytical, configurational, process typological and historico-geographical approaches, have been especially valuable (Kropf, 2009). But there is considerable scope for further endeavours.

From the early days of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, gaps have existed between the publications in different languages. Solutions to the problem have in recent decades mostly entailed non-anglophone morphologists wrestling with the difficulties of expressing their research findings in English. Other boundaries that need to be addressed are those between urban morphology and fields of investigation that share an interest in urban areas but rarely draw upon one another's findings.

Notable among the boundaries with urban morphology that have had relatively few crossings or attempted crossings has been that with urban history, though there is an exception in this issue (pp. 141–54). Another boundary that has proved hard to cross, but has attracted a good deal of attention within ISUF in the last few years, is that between research and practice. The need to focus attention on an aspect of this boundary, specifically between historical urban morphology and heritage conservation, has been addressed in this issue (pp. 101–8).

The large number of rarely crossed boundaries in urban morphology is probably in part a reflection of the interdisciplinarity of this field. But understanding the reasons for the problem, both within urban morphology and more generally, frequently entails knowledge of the organizational structures, such as disciplinary societies and university departmental frameworks, within which researchers carry out their work.

ISUF itself is of course a striking example of an organized attempt to cross boundaries. As many readers of this journal will know, the initial move to create ISUF entailed a conscious bringing together of both different disciplines and work in different languages. The main impetus came from English-speaking geographers, Italian-speaking architects and French-speaking architects (Moudon, 1997). It succeeded in creating a body of enthusiasts about the study of urban form drawn from many countries and a range of disciplines. Nevertheless, since the first few formative years of the new organization were as recent as the 1990s, the English language has almost inevitably become the main medium of communication, albeit that numerous regional networks have come into existence in which other languages are strongly represented.

However, infrequently-crossed boundaries between urban morphology and other significantly related fields continue to be numerous. Indeed they are more numerous than they were in the first half of the twentieth century, when separate specialisms were less developed. A fairly new boundary has come into existence in recent decades with the creation in the English-speaking world of 'architectural geography'. Despite the significant place of geographical perspectives on architecture within urban morphology for over 100 years in German-speaking countries, the new architectural geography that has arisen, largely in North America and the United Kingdom, has as yet minimal interrelationship with urban morphology. And this is more than a language divide between German speakers and English speakers. It also relates to a significant difference between the ways in which urban morphologists and anglophone architectural geographers have come to view the built environment (Goss, 1988). One of the strongest boundaries at present, that between the typological process approach of Italian architects of the Caniggian school and the perspective of architectural geographers, could remain

largely impermeable for a long time to come.

Perhaps a significant boundary that stands a better prospect of becoming more permeable in the near future is that between urban morphology and ecology. In a period in which awareness of the importance of green spaces within cities has grown widely, these spaces have become a significant focus of attention in the biosciences. However, the intra-urban spatial frameworks used in this work have tended to give emphasis to geometrical regularities. Equidistant concentric zones have especially been employed in the examination of spatial distributions. They reveal gross centre-periphery differences but lack sensitivity to the historico-geographical structure of cities. However, it is the latter that tends to be a key focus in urban morphological research. In this light the potential returns from crossing the urban morphological boundary with ecology would seem to be considerable.

In the period of nearly a quarter of a century since its foundation, ISUF has made significant progress in the task of strengthening

international and interdisciplinary perspectives on the built environment. However, it is salutary to reflect on the boundaries that remain to be crossed in more than the often cursory fashion attempted hitherto. It is to be hoped that pursuing these crossings will stimulate further the integrated thinking that is needed if urban morphology is to continue to make rapid strides in research and contribute significantly to urban planning and other types of practice.

### References

- Goss, J. (1988) 'The built environment and social theory: towards an architectural geography', *Professional Geographer* 40, 392–403.
- Kropf, K. (2009) 'Aspects of urban form', *Urban Morphology* 13, 105–20.
- Moudon, A. V. (1997) 'Urban morphology as an emerging interdisciplinary field', *Urban Morphology* 1, 3–10.

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## Cutting into the substance of urban form

A lecture on this topic was delivered to the Urban Design Group by Karl Kropf. The general theme of the talk was urban morphology in practice and Kropf took it as an opportunity to present both a survey of recent work and a polemic on the role of urban morphology in urban design practice.

The survey of recent work illustrated the common use of the core morphological concept of urban tissue or character areas. Examples included conservation area appraisals, urban historic characterizations, as well as urban character studies, research into methods of assessing environmental performance of urban form, the French application of urban morphological analysis to the Plan Local d'Urbanisme, and the use of morphological analysis in design.

The examples were interwoven with an argument about the unrealized potential of urban morphology in design, by way of thoughts from the likes of Walter Benjamin, Kevin Lynch and Richard Sennett. It was Sennett's exploration of craftsmanship that provided the focus for Kropf's main argument.

A video of the talk is included in the archive of previous talks recorded as part of the UrbanNous initiative that provides access to digital multimedia focusing on urbanism.

The talk can be viewed in a browser at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/urbandesigntgroup/UrbanMorphologyKarlKropf.htm>

The full catalogue can be found at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/udgevents.htm>

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