Seeking an integrated approach to urban form: tasks ahead

A number of socio-economic, scientific and technical developments were closely associated with the growth of knowledge in the twentieth century. Developments in information technology in the latter years of that century were among those that have been most widely acknowledged. Two others of major significance exerted their influence over somewhat longer time-spans. One was arguably inherent in the growth of knowledge – the increase in specialization. The other – the increasing dominance of the English language – was to a major extent an outcome of British colonialism and two world wars. Though the strength of these two developments was recognized long ago, it is only in the twenty-first century that their extent has been the subject of much systematic documentation or that their implications have been widely addressed in the academic literature (Alves and Pozzebon, 2013; Bański and Ferenc, 2013).

The implications for urban morphology of this combination of specialization and what has been termed more recently, and perhaps somewhat irreverently, ‘anglophone squint’ are no less than in most other fields of knowledge. Indeed, because of urban morphology’s inherently interdisciplinary and geographical character they are in some respects a particular concern in this field. It is not surprising therefore, and is certainly of fundamental importance, that contributions by adherents to a variety of disciplines have been integral to Urban Morphology from its inception. It is also salutary that contributions to this journal have been numerous by authors for whom English is not their first language.

In respect of disciplines, architecture, geography and planning have provided the most numerous contributors to Urban Morphology. Since within each of these disciplines a different perspective on urban form tends to prevail, the challenges of integration in a world of increasing specialization are a major consideration. Furthermore, within disciplines there have developed different schools of thought, often pursuing distinct modes of enquiry. Necessarily, many articles pursue one of these distinct modes in depth. The challenge of exploring the linkages and misfits between different approaches therefore becomes greater over time, yet arguably of increasing importance. And there have been notable attempts in this journal to fulfil this task, for example by combining different approaches (Griffiths et al., 2010) and undertaking comparative studies (Kropf, 2009; Oliveira et al., 2015).

A further challenge that has become particularly evident within urban morphology and has increased broadly in parallel with, and not unrelated to, increasing specialization is achieving the necessary complementarity of research and practice. That progress on this has been conspicuously slow has also been emphasized in contributions to this journal (McCormack, 2013). While the causes of the problem are various, inadequacies in education are evidently strongly implicated (Samuels, 2014). Treating urban form largely in terms of separate components and physical structures, rather than as an integrated entity, is a major part of the problem.

At the same time, despite advances in electronic communication, opportunities to resolve such issues by drawing on a wide range of research, practice and education around the world are arguably being reduced by the fact that findings are increasingly being transmitted in research publications through a Western, especially anglophone, lens. The increasing tendency for communication, especially between academics, to be dominated by the English language has on the whole been accepted as a fait accompli, including among urban morphologists. However, the implications of this for what is researched, how it is researched, and the character and scope of our developing field of knowledge are too significant to be largely ignored.

Within urban morphology, part of the task of addressing this issue must rest with ISUF
Editorial comment

When *Urban Morphology* was started, English was already the lingua franca of ISUF. But a good deal of the impetus for the foundation of the organization came from outside the anglophone world. And that momentum has been maintained if judged by the parts of the world from which contributions to the journal have emanated. Averaged over the 18 years since the journal began, anglophone and non-anglophone parts of the world have been roughly equally represented if the locations of authors are indicative. However, the large amount of translation into English that this entails raises several issues. Importantly, there are the uncertainties surrounding the integrity of translations, particularly where articles employ qualitative rather than quantitative methods. A quite different type of consideration to which urban morphologists and many other researchers alike should be alert is the probability that concepts are viewed, albeit subconsciously, as having greater merit by virtue of the greater exposure they receive in English-language journals.

The problem is clearly much more than one of anglophone squint. Europe and North America have a small proportion of the world’s urban fabric but are the subjects of a large proportion of research. The extent of the discrepancy continues to be an unsatisfactory feature of virtually all the so called international social science journals. However, in the case of *Urban Morphology* it is noteworthy that in the most recent 5-year period (2010-14) the proportion of contributions (articles and Viewpoints) by authors located outside Europe and North America rose to 23 per cent. Even so, such a statistic needs to be seen in a wider context. In recent years the movement of both graduate students and established academics into North America and Europe (especially the UK) from other parts of the world has been on an unprecedented scale. While this has been an aid to enlightenment about large areas of the world previously poorly known outside the countries concerned, it has also increased the strength of the Western lens through which other parts of the world are viewed. It is to be hoped that more of the intellectual traffic will be in both directions than has hitherto been the case. For it would be a lost opportunity if insights to be derived from other cultural regions were not harnessed within Western research, education and practice.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, our distinguished forebears, a good few writing in German, French or Italian, bridged several disciplines and languages with a versatility that is admirable. In striving for an integrated view of the built environment today, a host of new challenges are faced. Only a soupçon of what might be entailed in pursuing them can be offered in the short span of this editorial. The pages of future issues of *Urban Morphology* await contributions that take up the challenges touched on here. They also await attempts to set out and address other challenges facing those researching within our field, including the communication of findings for the benefit of education and practice.

References


J. W. R. Whitehand