Editorial comment

Urban morphology: how interdisciplinary? how international?

Urban morphology has arguably existed as a field of knowledge for over a century (Schlüter, 1899). Yet despite its significant growth in recent decades there remains little systematic investigation of either its place within the miscellany of disciplines or its development internationally. Though reference has frequently been made to its interdisciplinarity (Conzen, 2004, p. 282; Moudon, 1997), and its international scope has been assumed, documentation of these aspects has been minimal. However, ISUF, and especially this journal, have now existed long enough to offer the basis for at least some elementary findings in relation to these important dimensions.

Arguably some of the most fruitful contributions to urban morphology, including a number in this journal, have consciously brought together elements of several disciplines (Kropf, 2009). But rarely, it would seem, have organizational units of urban morphology been established, for example within institutions of higher education, although the founding of national and international networks of researchers under the auspices of ISUF has been noteworthy over the past 10 years or so. There has also recently appeared in print a list of disciplines in which it is suggested that urban morphology is used (Kropf, 2017, p.10). It would seem timely therefore to attempt a brief stocktaking of some of these interrelated aspects of urban morphology, and perhaps there is no better place to begin than by examining the contents of this journal.

Examination of the 142 full-length articles published in Urban Morphology up to the end of 2017 is revealing about the disciplines of authors as judged by their departmental affiliations within their institutions. Most authors were members of departments of architecture, geography or planning. In 1997–2007 these three disciplines (hereafter referred to as ‘the big three’) accounted for 76 per cent of authors (architecture 31 per cent, geography 27 per cent, planning 18 per cent). Judged by the names of departments, the number of disciplines represented was sixteen. However, in 2008–2017 the share of authors affiliated to the big three fell to 57 per cent, accompanied by an increase (to 23) in the total number of disciplines represented. The extent of this spread across disciplines is striking, but so is its ‘thinness’. The next nearest to the big three was urban design with 7 per cent of authors in 1997–2007 but only 2 per cent in 2008–2017. Only one other discipline (archaeology) accounted for more than a single article in 1997–2007. Indeed over the entire span from 1997 to 2017 no discipline other than the big three and urban design accounted for more than five articles. Over this period the historical disciplines (including archaeology, architectural history, history, medieval studies, and classics) together accounted for only 10 articles.

However, these gross data have a number of limitations. Not least, they take no account of major differences between countries. In terms of the countries in which the institutions of the authors of articles were located, there has been a slight fall in the proportion from English-speaking countries (namely, those in which English is the first language) from 44 per cent in 1997–2007 to 40 per cent in 2008–2017, a rise in the number from the UK having been more than outweighed by a fall in the number from the USA. However, the most striking changes were the rise in the proportion of articles from China and the Portuguese-speaking countries of Brazil and Portugal itself, and the decline in the number from Germany and France, two countries of major importance in the early years of urban morphology.

These changes have been matched to varying degree by changes in the extent to which various countries were the subjects of study. English-speaking counties were the main or only countries studied in 29 per cent of articles in 1997–2007, but the comparative figure for 2008–2017 was only 15 per cent. However, the proportion of articles concerned with
largely worldwide matters, or two or more countries, or not related to specific countries, increased from 16 per cent to 27 per cent.

If there is a particularly noteworthy aspect of change in the location of authors of articles over the past 2 decades, it is arguably increasing internationalization. This is to some extent evident in the greater spread of countries in which authors are located, and the increased number of articles emanating from parts of the developing world. Particularly striking is the increase in the last 4 years in the number of articles whose co-authors were based in two or more countries: eight, compared with only six in the preceding 17 years. However, there is a conspicuous absence of contributions from certain parts of the world, notably almost all of Africa, except its northern extremities, Russia, and the sub-continent of India.

While there is evidence of the increasing presence in Urban Morphology of the work of researchers in a great variety of disciplines, care is needed in the inferences drawn. This increasing presence is not in itself evidence that the articles themselves are interdisciplinary. Where themes, concepts or methods emanating from more than one discipline are evident in an article, there is a strong implication of interdisciplinarity. A similar inference might arguably be drawn from the co-authoring of articles by authors from different disciplines. Here again, though the numbers are small, an increase over time is evident: in 1997–2007, there were only four articles with co-authors from different disciplines, compared with eleven in 2008–2017. This must of course be seen in the context of the fairly small proportion of articles in Urban Morphology that are co-authored (only ten (16 per cent) in 1997–2007, but rising to 33 (42 per cent) in 2008–2017).

In relation to this limited stocktaking of urban morphology’s interdisciplinarity and internationality, perhaps the most important caveat relates to Urban Morphology itself. Though it is an international journal, it publishes only a tiny fraction of the research worldwide that purports to be, or could be recognized as, urban morphology. But it is to be hoped that this short excursion into some basic information about our field will prompt wider and deeper discussion.

References


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