Minding The Gap
Linking different approaches to built-form studies

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Pages: 361-363
In her first editorial, Julienne Hanson (2010) sets out a broad prospectus for JOSS. She outlines what promises to be a most welcome addition to the range of journals concerned with the built environment. In its aim to be 'intentionally inclusive and multi-scalar' (p. ii) and 'extend beyond space syntax' (p. iii) the new journal will share ground with a number of journals. Among these is Urban Morphology. In its focus on urban form, this too is a journal that seeks to link different approaches: bridging the gaps that have developed - often between disciplines; sometimes within them. The problem of the separate worlds that exist within urban-form studies is, coincidentally, the subject of the editorial in the current issue of Urban Morphology and I welcome this opportunity to reiterate the points I make there (Whitehand, 2010). Some of them will, I hope, interest readers of JOSS, perhaps sufficiently to elicit further contributions to this Forum.

Though the desirability of interdisciplinarity is widely acknowledged, the development of further specialities remains an integral part of the expansion of knowledge. It is probably inevitable that gaps in research communication networks reflect the presence of these specialities. Problems arise, however, when the gaps inhibit development on either side or discourage integration.

The development of research on urban form has been characterized by a number of different approaches. Kropf (2009) considers four: spatial analytical, configurational (space syntax), process typological and historico-geographical. Compilation of a comprehensive list would entail consideration of a number of different disciplines or sub-disciplines in which urban form is a significant part of the subject matter - for example archaeology, architecture, history, architectural history, geography, landscape architecture, planning and urban design. In each case different communication patterns exist, as reflected, for example, in the works that authors cite.

The effects of disciplinary boundaries can be striking. The announcement of the Tenth International Conference on Urban History provides an example. In relation to the session on 'buildings as historical evidence' it states that 'the physical form of the city - its landscapes, open spaces and buildings - has been used to illustrate change, but rarely has it been analysed as a source in itself to
throw light on how and why cities grow and evolve’ (European Association for Urban History, 2010).
Yet within geographical urban morphology such analysis has for long been central. The same announcement continues with the claim that in architectural studies 'seldom have buildings and landscapes been examined with a view to contributing to understanding the changing nature of towns and cities'. This too will be a cause of raised eyebrows. Many architects of the Caniggian school will be chagrined to learn that activities integral to their endeavours over many years have scarcely entered the perceptions of urban historians.

In urban morphology, as in the social sciences and humanities more widely, the lack of awareness of relevant work in other disciplines is exacerbated by language barriers. To some extent this reflects the lesser dominance of the English language in such fields, in comparison with the physical sciences, and the tendency for researchers to investigate urban form within their own country.

Building bridges between the various communities of interest, whether they relate to languages, countries, disciplines or some other aspect of specialization, is a much needed activity. But it would be unrealistic to expect JOSS or any other journal to integrate fully the various separate worlds that built environment researchers and practitioners inhabit. Editors may set out goals, but the positions their journals come to occupy in the vast span of serial literature depend on a multitude of factors, not least the inclinations of contributors. Many researchers and practitioners limit themselves to the reassuring environments of familiar niches. But exploring and bridging the spaces between communities of interest can be particularly rewarding. Three examples in the current issue of Urban Morphology may be of interest to readers of JOSS: they combine, or consider the potential of combining, approaches that have hitherto had largely separate existences.

Griffiths et al. (2010) combine Conzenian and space syntax approaches to the analysis of urban form. They conclude that the relationship between suburban built form and socio-economic activity is both configurational and historical in nature. Stanilov (2010) considers the merits of linking urban modelling more closely with urban morphology. He argues that combining such activities as microsimulation with historical insights derived from, for example, town-plan analysis, could be of major value in developing knowledge of urban growth and change. He also envisages urban modelling as a means of extending the role of urban morphology in management of the built environment. This is a rather different linking of intellectual worlds from that being advanced by Samuels (2010). His concern is that few of the fruits of research on urban form, fundamental though they are to understanding places, are being employed by those seeking to establish principles and methods for conserving historical urban landscapes. He focuses attention on the need for interaction between urban morphology and historical area assessment.

These are welcome contributions to bridging the gaps between the various groups of researchers and practitioners concerned with urban form. But there is a great deal more to be done!
References


