

## Bringing order to urban morphology?

Despite the long history of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, there has hitherto been a singular lack of textbooks in the English language that have been explicitly on this subject. This deficiency has at last been rectified in the form of two such books – one by Karl Kropf (2016) and the other by Vítor Oliveira (2016). These textbooks have followed some 20 years after the foundation of *Urban Morphology* as the first journal to be devoted exclusively to this field. However, harbingers of these most welcome developments can be detected very much earlier. Indeed early evidence of scholars reaching towards a field of knowledge focused on the form of cities is to be found in the German-speaking world in the nineteenth century (see, for example, Fritz, 1894).

To trace the history of research and teaching that has led to the publications of 2016 marking a particularly notable year in the annals of urban morphology would itself merit a book. A signal feature of such a book in the case of the main disciplines that contributed to urban morphology would be the particularly formative role of the German-speaking countries, at least until the last one-third of the twentieth century. Although no urban morphology textbooks as such emanated from those countries, there was considerable scrutiny of aspects of urban morphology within German-language publications. A succinct review of many facets of the field up to 1930 is contained in a paper on the state of urban geography by Hans Dörries (1930). It is appropriate that this appeared in one of the key *geography* serials. For although urban morphology has throughout its history been multidisciplinary, the contributions to it, at least up to the 1960s, by geographers, especially German-speaking geographers, have been especially noteworthy. The monograph on Vienna by Bobek and Lichtenberger (1966) is but one of many examples.

There have of course been many books, as distinct from textbooks, on urban morphology – more than there is space for even passing mention here. Of those published

within the last half-century, that by James E. Vance (1990) is one of the most noteworthy. Opinions probably vary on which publication can lay claim to being the first textbook on urban morphology. A strong candidate must be a notable book published in French by Rémy Allain (2004).

There is little doubt that the recency of the writing of urban morphology textbooks is related to the comparative scarcity of courses, as distinct from parts of courses, specifically on urban morphology. One of the earliest courses within the English-speaking world was given in the 1950s and 1960s in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (initially King's College, Newcastle, in the University of Durham) by M. R. G. Conzen. No textbook was written to accompany this course, but preparatory notes on a major text on 'Urban morphology: its nature and development' were prepared by Conzen, mainly between 1992 and 1999. Sadly, this project had not progressed beyond note form when the author died at the age of 93 in 2000. The notes, lightly edited, were published in an appendix to *Thinking about urban form* (Conzen, 2004, pp. 269–83).

Not surprisingly, the contents of the books by Kropf and Oliveira differ a good deal from those of the book planned by Conzen. This is partly a reflection of the different environmental and historical influences to which these authors were subject. Conzen's thinking was steeped in the remarkable intellectual and other developments in Europe, especially German-speaking Europe, in the inter-war years. Kropf and Oliveira have been much influenced by their experiences of the different environments of research and practice that have been taking shape in the Western world in the last one-third of the twentieth century and the early years of this century: Kropf in the United States and Europe; Oliveira predominantly in Europe.

As is evident from the outline of his book, Conzen was particularly conscious of the

importance of comparative international study: comparisons between Europe and Eastern Asia were an especial fascination for him, despite the obstacles to carrying out research in Eastern Asia during much of his academic career. The books by Kropf and Oliveira also differ significantly from one another in their contents. However, a notable aspect of both books is evidence that their authors share with Conzen an exceptional capacity for integrating different strands of interdisciplinary thought.

The authors of these new books have for many years had key roles within ISUF and they continue to be two of the most prolific authors of both contributions to this journal and papers presented to ISUF conferences. They both deploy to advantage their experience of combining research and planning practice.

The relationship between urban morphological research and planning has been close to the core of ISUF since this organization came into existence. Indeed one of the first books on urban conservation to be authored by an ISUF member was substantially grounded in the approach to urban morphology developed by M. R. G. Conzen (Larkham, 1996). But arguably at least as influential in stimulating the interest of ISUF members in the applications of urban morphology in planning has been the Italian school of thought stemming from the work of Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia. This too has gained momentum, helped by translations of a key work by Caniggia and Gian Luigi Maffei (1979) into Spanish (in 1995), French (in 2000) and English (in 2001). Indeed translations of key books with urban morphological foci have flourished since ISUF came into existence. Not least there has been the translation into Chinese (in 2011) and Italian (in 2012) of the key study of Alnwick by Conzen (1969).

While 2016 has undoubtedly been notable for its textbooks on urban morphology, it has also been noteworthy for marking a significant stage in the growth of urban morphology in China: a country, along with Japan, to which Conzen planned to give especial attention in the penultimate section of his book. He would have been delighted that this year ISUF has

for the second time in its short history held its annual conference in China (see this issue, pp. 171–3). The recent growth of urban morphology in the Far East has been remarkable and the prospects would seem to be good that one or both of the textbooks by Kropf and Oliveira will before long be translated into Chinese and Japanese. It is to be hoped that the momentum generated within those countries, which is very evident in contributions to this journal, will soon be marked by urban morphology textbooks by Chinese and Japanese authors.

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