Fifteenth International Seminar on Urban Form, Artimino, Italy, 21-23 November 2008

The ISUF 2008 conference was held in the extraordinarily rich cultural landscape of Carmignano, ‘the heart of Tuscany’, at Artimino, near Florence, Italy. CISPUT (Centro Internazionale per lo Studio dei Processi Urbani e Territoriali) or International Centre for the Study of Urban and Regional Evolution, founded in Pienza, Italy in 1981 organized the conference in association with ISUF Italia, formed in 2007.

The history of Artimino would deserve an article on its own, as would the Medicean Villa in which the conference was so superbly accommodated. The Etruscans left exquisite marks on Artimino, as did so many of its later residents. The Medicean Villa (Figure 1) is located on the ‘alpha ridge’ in a majestic rolling landscape of astounding beauty and power. For this simple reporter with physical and mental origins closer to Ultima Thule, it made this event a magical one, as no doubt it did for many others. Many participants were accommodated in the comfortable Albergo Paggeria Medicia, a few steps away from the Villa, with some staying equally comfortably in the adjacent village, a straight and fairly level 1km walk away on the next hilltop.

In all just over 50 people from about a dozen countries participated in the conference. The wonderful atmosphere of the place, its food and wines, combined with the small size of the attending group, helped to give the conference the intimacy of a luxurious private seminar (Figure 2).

Conference and presentations

The conference was held over three days, Friday to Sunday (two half days, with one very full day in the middle), with in all three key lectures and 32 shorter presentations. It was of course not possible for one person to cover 35 events, most of which were arranged in parallel sessions. My reporting therefore remains patchy and highly...

Figure 1. The Medicean Villa at Artimino: venue of ISUF 2008.
Reports

have been very interesting to have been presented central issues only partly challenged? It would theory to particular urban areas may have left However, presentations reliant on the application of concrete case was not always easy to follow. urban form as both overarching cultural study and methodology of urban morphology. The idea several Italian researchers, with ‘explicit’ theory territorial evolutionary perspective, as presented by emerged in the potential linking of an overarching form conservation and World Heritage activity speak of a need for a ‘refreshed’ relevant perspective. The developmental dimensions of the study of urban form as a knowledge field are at present hugely underutilized. More connections need to be opened from a ‘what and how’ of urban form to contributing towards the discourse on ‘whose’ is heritage and urban form, and how these resources could be developed to further the built environment and ‘specificity of place’. However, where I see contours of academic and intellectual shackles, others may naturally see pure potential.

Challenges

The purpose of such a conference is of course many-sided: to meet, exchange, inform and disseminate knowledge on recent and current research – all in continuation of a long conversation. This inevitably gave rise to a wide span of topics presented. Could a conference such as that at Artimino be even more useful if narrowed towards a limited range of distinctly related topics, for deeper discussion and reflection?

The search for common ground, either taken for granted or seen as not at all present, often disappears from such gatherings for reasons of time. At Artimino it was indeed given some attention. It was my impression that even more time could have been provided without upsetting the participants. The enthusiasm shown in informal discussions on phenomena such as ‘fringe belt’ or ‘cintura de frangia’ or ‘area periurbana’ indicated this to be the case. To the uninitiated, an interesting challenge might be seen to have emerged in the potential linking of an overarching territorial evolutionary perspective, as presented by several Italian researchers, with ‘explicit’ theory and methodology of urban morphology. The idea of an evolution from ridge to valley to settlement to urban form as both overarching cultural study and concrete case was not always easy to follow. However, presentations reliant on the application of theory to particular urban areas may have left central issues only partly challenged? It would have been very interesting to have been presented with an analysis of Artimino and its surrounding cultural landscape, perhaps in an illustration of positions shared and challenged by the Muratorian and Conzenian perspectives.

The need for some such recognition of the terminological problems when scholars from different traditions and countries meet also struck me at the recent IASTE Conference, held in Oxford in December 2008. As a newcomer to the large events of that body (in this case 150 presentations, selected from nearly 500 proposals, in parallel sessions over 4 full days) it took me until the last plenary session to appreciate the full scope and intended focus of IASTE; and to appreciate some of the inherent differences of view on both present and future activities.

It is not hard to remain a loyal participant at ISUF, or for that matter IASTE, events. My own background as an architect and architectural researcher, involved in both shaping the built environment and employing built heritage at theoretical and practical levels to further local community development, built heritage and architecture, makes it tempting to see the field of urban morphology freeing itself of some ‘traditional shackles’. Practical use of the wide knowledge contained within urban morphology seems to me much needed. It has significant potential in the complex cross-field activity of international urban conservation; an activity that appears still rooted in a tradition of preserving objects, not urban landscapes (historical or contemporary). Doctrines expressed through international charters of built form conservation and World Heritage activity speak of a need for a ‘refreshed’ relevant perspective. The developmental dimensions of the study of urban form as a knowledge field are at present hugely underutilized. More connections need to be opened from a ‘what and how’ of urban form to contributing towards the discourse on ‘whose’ is heritage and urban form, and how these resources could be developed to further the built environment and ‘specificity of place’. However, where I see contours of academic and intellectual shackles, others may naturally see pure potential.
A major purpose of élite intellectual environments such as ISUF, in addition to the objectives just identified, should be that of building bridges towards related and new fields of concern – particularly as ISUF as an entity is in possession of unique knowledge, experience, networks and credibility.

General meeting

The short presentations made by ISUF’s main officers gave a picture of an academic association with an expanding international perspective, as was so evident in the recent major conference in Brazil in 2007 and is manifest in the planning of the major conference in China in 2009. This means that ISUF is today less ‘Eurocentric’, seriously welcoming new fields and geographic areas to join its activities. However, the reports also affirmed the problems of a restricted economy in which voluntary activities are the main basis of operation.

The material and quality provided by ISUF through our journal *Urban Morphology* is something few other organizations can match, particularly with similarly restricted operational resources. The contribution by a small, so well known and appreciated, ‘band’ of ISUF’s longstanding senior members is very significant in achieving the academic standard and credibility that ISUF and *Urban Morphology* enjoys internationally.

The host organizers, CISPUT and ISUF Italia, and the very pleasant and able local staff are to be congratulated for arranging a smooth and challenging conference within such an exceptionally pleasant environment.

Amund Sinding-Larsen, Statsbygg, Oslo, Norway.  
Address for correspondence: Stasjonsveien 35, 1365 Blommenholm, Norway.  
E-mail: asinding@online.no

Figure 2. The conference banquet.