

Seventeenth International Seminar on Urban Form, Hamburg, Germany, 20-23 August, 2010

The seventeenth ISUF conference was hosted by the Institute of Geography at the University of Hamburg in collaboration with the Institute of Comparative Urban History at the University of Münster. The overarching theme of the conference was 'Formation and persistence of townscape', a subject broad enough to encompass a wide variety of research employing a mixture of morphological perspectives on issues related to characteristics of the built environment. The conference presentations were grouped in relation to twelve more specific themes:

1. Urban morphological theory
2. Models of town planning in former and present times
3. Methods of analysing and mapping the development of townscape
4. The internal dialectic of form and function in urban development
5. The morphogenesis of particular towns
6. Historical dimensions of the evolution of townscape in various cultural contexts
7. Historical preservation, sympathetic architecture, and innovative design as strategies for the redevelopment of urban areas
8. The morphology of urban open space in history and planning
9. Defensible architecture and gated communities in former and present times
10. Problems of townscape relating to growth and shrinkage of towns
11. Cognitive mapping of urban space
12. The design of digital cities

The first day of the conference started with a plenary session featuring two presentations on the importance of city models that have emerged from the practice of particular design philosophies. Professor Eckart Ehlers from the Department of Political and Cultural Change of the University of Bonn presented an intriguing cross-cultural comparative analysis of the use of city models in theory and practice, highlighting both commonalities and specifics in their application in different socio-economic contexts. His presentation was followed by that of Professor Jürgen Lafrenz from the Institute of Geography at the University of Hamburg who offered a more detailed exposé of one such model as exemplified in the works of the

prolific and influential contemporary architect Meinhard von Gerkan.

After the morning session there was a half-day walking tour of Hamburg's vibrant inner city and its historical waterfront. The harbour area, which has been the centre of the region's economic activity and thus inextricably linked with the city's history, has experienced its share of decline in the post-industrial period. It has also become a target for regeneration efforts spearheaded by one of the largest waterfront redevelopment projects in Europe – Harbour City – which was the final stop of the walking tour. The long day ended on the River Elbe with a relaxing icebreaker on board the boat Bergedorf: conference participants were rewarded with an unforgettable view of the late summer sun setting over Hamburg's immense docklands.

In contrast to the visual stimulation provided by Hamburg's unique urban scenery, the lack of spectacular distractions around the conference venue – notably the utilitarian premises of the Institute of Geography – offered an opportunity to focus on the conference presentations which commenced early the next morning. Indeed a great level of concentration was required from the conference attendants in order to track presentations of interest as these were packed in seven concurrent sessions running over the course of only a day and a half. Fortunately, all the papers have been made available online at the conference's website (www.isuf2010.de). A chance for the participants to catch up on the work of colleagues whose presentations they missed was provided at the end of the day during a leisurely boat trip down the Elbe to the conference dinner at Schulauer Fährhaus (Figure 1).

The next day was dedicated to a visit to the nearby town of Lübeck. This former capital of the Hanseatic League, inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites, features one of the best-preserved historical cores of any city of comparable size in Europe. The half-day examination of the town's centre was preceded by a propaedeutic session in Lübeck's historic town hall (Figure 2). A series of concise presentations offered a brief overview of some key morphological concepts, highlighting their relevance to investigations of the rich historical fabric of Lübeck. Later, during the half-day tour,



Figure 1. Conference participants exchanging thoughts during a boat trip on the River Elbe at the end of the first day (photograph by Terry Slater).



Figure 2. Basic morphological concepts being reviewed in Lubeck's town hall prior to investigation of the town centre (photograph by Terry Slater).



Figure 3. Detailed examination of Lübeck's historic town centre led by Jürgen Lafrenz (photograph by Susan Whitehand).

conference participants were presented with numerous vivid illustrations of morphological processes exemplifying both instances of resilience and change within the richly textured fabric of the city (Figure 3). Those who wanted to find out more about the development of Lübeck outside its historic core embarked on their own explorations in the short time remaining before the return trip to Hamburg.

The conference concluded the next day with morning paper sessions followed by the Annual General Meeting of ISUF. A post-conference excursion was offered to those participants with an interest in the application of methods of ground-plan analysis to historical towns in the northern extremity of Germany, between the North Sea and the Baltic Seas. The rest of us dispersed to our home bases charged with the energy of yet another successful ISUF conference. We are much indebted to the chairman of the local organizing committee, Jürgen Lafrenz and his assistants, especially Alex Rostkowski, whose ability seemingly to be in two or three places at the same time was a source of wonderment.

As a regular participant in almost all ISUF conferences until Trani 2003, but not having had an

opportunity to attend any of the annual events since then, the conference in Hamburg prompted me to reflect on the evolution of ISUF. Upon entering the conference hall, my immediate reaction was of shock at the nearly complete change in the composition of conference participants over the last decade. I was looking forward to a reunion with some old friends from the early days of ISUF, but to my great surprise I hardly recognized a familiar face. After carefully scanning the audience, I managed to spot a few representatives of the old guard – veterans and founders of ISUF – but they were few and far between, submerged in the crowd of new faces. My personal disappointment aside, I came to the realization that this is not a bad thing: it is a testimony to the organization's ability to regenerate. This observation urged me to look for evidence of this process in the contents of the conference proceedings.

Of the total of 129 papers presented at the conference, slightly over one-half (66) were contributed by researchers from outside Europe. This is a clear indication that urban morphology as a discipline is outgrowing its Eurocentric origins, linked to the early emergence of the field in Germany, Italy, England and France. The geographical extension of urban morphology as a trusted and valuable method of scientific inquiry to other continents could be viewed as an inevitable outcome of the globalization of knowledge, but it is also a testimony to the success of ISUF in promoting the ideas of Conzen and Muratori outside the circle of the masters' immediate followers. Undoubtedly, the conferences in Brazil in 2007 and China in 2009 played a critical part in this process. The number of papers from Brazil presented at the Hamburg conference (20) equalled the number of papers submitted by authors from Italy and England combined. Notable was also the level of participation of researchers from Portugal, who presented twelve papers in Hamburg – a number matching the presentations delivered by scholars from the host country, Germany.

Another significant shift in comparing Hamburg 2010 with earlier ISUF conferences is related to changes in the topics covered by the presenters. As a budding researcher in the mid-1990s, enthralled by the dramatic scale and shifting patterns of urbanization in the late-twentieth century, I was quite disheartened by the relatively conservative approaches to investigations of urban form dominating the field when I joined ISUF. I felt that in order to unlock its true potential, urban morphology needed to escape from several self-imposed constraints. My wish-list included a

reorientation of the discipline's main thrust from investigations of the past to analysis of the present; a re-focus from the slow transformations in city centres to the dynamic explosions taking place at the urban edge; and a switch from meticulous small-scale investigations of pieces of the urban fabric to systematic large-scale analysis of metropolitan form. This, of course, required embracing technology as an enabler of radical disciplinary transformation.

While I never articulated these ideas in writing, let alone tried to push them through institutional channels, I am humbled by the speed with which urban morphology has evolved as a field and surpassed my boldest expectations over the course of less than a decade. Checking on the evidence to confirm this perception, I started to count the number of papers in the ISUF 2010 proceedings that had as a main focus the analysis of urban environments pre-dating the twentieth century. Halfway through the count, I gave up as it became clear that such papers comprised no more than 5 per cent of the total. This reorientation of disciplinary focus from the past to the present is to be explained perhaps less by the power of my wishful thinking, than by the recent explosion in the geography of morphological research and the burning problems that societies in the developing world are facing within a context of rapid urbanization. This shift from general historical, theoretical, or methodological explorations to studies aimed at informing more directly the practice of city planning is paralleled in many of the ISUF 2010 papers investigating urban development in Europe.

The fascinating trajectory of urban morphology as a discipline and its realignment with the pressing needs of contemporary urbanization is a timely and much welcomed development. However, as is always the case during dynamic periods of transformation, it would be useful to assess the dangers brought about by processes of rapid growth and change within any system, be that a city, an organization, or a scientific discipline. Are we in danger of losing something precious in the course of expansion? Do we jeopardize the identity of the field by stretching its disciplinary boundaries? Will the expansion of the thematic coverage result in compromising the integrity of the established methodological framework?

The answers to these questions will be provided

in the forthcoming decade, and at this point we can only speculate on the future development of the field. Ultimately, urban morphology will only gain in strength if we establish better linkages with other disciplines, leading to new paths of collaboration that are mutually beneficial (Stanilov, 2010). Concerted efforts to establish interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing the most pressing problems of today need to be more actively encouraged as they promise to improve the popularity and effectiveness of urban morphology as a tool for understanding and managing the urban environment. My sense is that urban morphologists could do even better on this front, seeking more actively connections with the pressing challenges of contemporary times. An example of this is the urgency of linking morphological research with issues relating to energy and climate change. Judging by the proceedings of ISUF 2010, urban morphologists have not yet embraced wholeheartedly this challenge. Using the online software Textalyser (textalyser.net), an analysis of the frequency of use of the terms 'climate change' and 'identity' (two of the topics listed in the programme) in the conference proceedings reveals that the term 'climate change' was used in seven instances, mostly in the work of researchers from the host institution. This is a discouragingly low number compared with the use of the term 'identity' – a well-established subject in urban morphology which appears in the proceedings 56 times. However, given the dynamic development of the field and the tenor of many discussions during the conference coffee breaks, I expect to see a considerably different ratio as early as next year – another good reason to look forward to ISUF 2011 in Montréal.

Reference

Stanilov, K. (2010) 'Bridging the gap between urban morphology and urban modelling', *Urban Morphology* 14, 57-8.

Kiril Stanilov, Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London, 1-19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 7HB, UK. E-mail: kiril.stanilov@ucl.ac.uk
