The theme of the Twenty-Sixth International Seminar on Urban Form was ‘Cities as assemblages’. To use the words of the conference organizers, it was a concerted effort to discuss and debate ‘the embedding of different theories and methods’ in urban form analysis and design practice. High on the conference agenda, and featured as session topics, were the key challenges that face the field of urban morphology, such as the gaps between different approaches to urban morphology (Whitehand, 2015, 2017), the lack of cross-disciplinary studies, and the need for integrating research and practice (Whitehand, 2018).

Following the opening session, the first keynote presentation was by Alan Penn (University College London). He considered 2 decades of research on different approaches to defining a neighbourhood based on the geometry of street networks. Starting his talk with the sorites paradox, he questioned the point at which a neighbourhood exists. He explained how a series of space syntax measures of part-to-whole relationship (see, for example, Dalton, 2007; Yang and Hillier, 2007) and different community detection algorithms (see, for example, Law, 2017) had been used for identifying socially and economically meaningful neighbourhoods. He also highlighted the fact that recent work on this had extended the scope to examining the effects of new information technologies, such as social media posts, in defining the spatial notion of neighbourhoods. Penn’s talk revolved around a key message – that ‘the city operates in the locality of multiple scales’. This essentially entails studying the city as a system in which knowledge about ‘the local’ has to be gained through understanding the larger context.

Urban form analysis was also the focus of the last keynote speaker, Giuseppe Strappa (Sapienza University of Rome), who provided a different perspective on the part-to-whole relationship in the context of studying ancient cities. By contrasting and comparing two opposing interpretations, namely the city as an assemblage (urban elements are loosely grouped without a process) and the city as an aggregation (urban elements are organized in an orderly manner through phases), he argued that the legacy of the past city should be understood today as urban substrata: the original structures of the city could always be referred to in relation to the growth of new organisms. In other words, in this way current and ancient cities can be dynamically linked and one can be used to explain the form and formation of the other.

In contrast, the other two keynote speakers were more concerned with urban morphology and design practice. Anne Vernez Moudon (University of Washington) opened the second day of the conference with a presentation on an emerging trend of urban design. She argued that the advancement of tools and increasing availability of geospatial data have effectively broadened the scope and outreach of urban morphology, and that in this new environment different cities are now taking the strategy of *tabula plena* to reclaim urban spaces from the automobile and to recreate traditional urban forms – a reversal of Modernist urbanism and *tabula rasa* planning. In this process, urban morphology has been used as a means to react against Modernism and rethink superblocks. Moudon concluded the session with a call for reworking the twentieth-century city in the twenty-first century.

Following Moudon, the third keynote speaker, Wendy McClure (University of Idaho) (Figure 1) shifted the focus of urban design practice to the small railway towns and mining towns in the mountainous west of North America. She showed how the historico-geographical approach could be adapted and used to support planning policy development and inform design practice, and thereby preserve and sustain place identity in the face of significant social change and economic re-alignment. An interesting and very useful lesson from McClure’s presentation, specifically her applied research, was the employment of urban morphology in design workshops as a tool to effectively engage the public as well as different stakeholders. She opened up the unrealized potential of urban morphology in facilitating participatory planning and design.

In the parallel sessions approximately 220 presentations were delivered in 45 sessions under five themes. These were theories, methods and urban design, and two specific topics – urban conflicts and divided cities, and Mediterranean port cities in a global context. GIS-based quantitative approaches to urban form analysis and generation were central to the majority of papers. In light of the increasing availability of high-quality geospatial data highlighted by Moudon in her presentation, the further growth of this interest seems likely. However, there were very limited investigations
and discussions on how these new methods are related to different traditions of urban morphology, and how existing approaches might continue in the new data environment. Equally rare were presentations that focused on the combination of different morphological approaches, despite the fact that one theme was devoted especially to this particular issue. These contrasted with a relatively few endeavours that aimed at explicating existing methods and further consolidating the very foundations of urban morphology.

Particularly noteworthy were four special parallel sessions on the theme of urban conflicts and divided cities. These were conducted in the afternoon of the first day at the Chateau Status, right beside the buffer zone between the northern and southern parts of Nicosia. More than twenty presentations were given on research on different forms of social and spatial segregations in Nicosia and other cities around the world. This triggered lively discussions afterwards and throughout the reception in the evening. Another special parallel session that caught the attention of many participants was that on ISUF’s Regional Networks. Seven Regional Networks shared their various activities, including their conferences, workshops, research achievements and publications.

This allowed conference delegates who could not attend many of the parallel sessions to obtain an overview of present research on urban morphology internationally.

One of the highlights of the last day was the book launch of J.W.R. Whitehand and the historico-geographical approach to urban morphology, recently published by Springer. The editor of the book, Vítor Oliveira and the chapter authors, namely Kai Gu (Figure 2), Michael Barke, Peter Larkham, Karl Kropf and Ivor Samuels, each gave a presentation about Jeremy Whitehand’s tremendous contributions to the definition of urban morphology as a field of knowledge, and the establishment and key ideas of the historico-geographical approach. Very touching and remarkably memorable for many in the audience was that all authors vividly shared their close collegiality and co-operation with Whitehand over the past half-century, and appreciated his great personality which was unknown to many members of ISUF. Not being able to attend the conference, Whitehand expressed his gratitude to all the contributors through a video recording.

In the closing session, the President of ISUF, Wendy McClure reviewed the development of ISUF over the past 25 years and in particular
Figure 2. Kai Gu speaking at the book launch.

Figure 3. Discussion during the walking tour in Nicosia.
emphasized the need to encourage and promote collaborative research between ISUF Regional Networks. Larkham was welcomed as the new Editor of Urban Morphology, replacing Whitehand who has been serving this role since the birth of the journal in 1997. At the end of the session Brenda Case Scheer gave a foretaste of the next ISUF Conference, which has the theme ‘The twentieth-century city’ and will be held in Salt Lake City in the United States from 1 to 4 September 2020.

The organizing committee, chaired by Nadia Charalambous (University of Cyprus), deserve much praise for their great endeavours in organizing a smoothly run and successful conference. Sincere thanks should also be recorded for their efforts in orchestrating a series of activities, especially the walking tour to the north and south of Nicosia in the middle of the conference (Figure 3), the post-conference tour to the medieval city of Famagusta, and the small exhibition on the conference site about the historical development of Nicosia. Together these activities created a congenial atmosphere for fruitful exchange between all participants.

References


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