

## Urban Europe in Comparative Perspective: Eighth International Conference on Urban History, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 August – 2 September 2006

This successful conference was organized by The European Association for Urban History, founded in 1989 with support of the European Union. The idea came from a number of urban historians who now constitute the International Committee of the European Association, including Peter Clark, Pim Kooij and Lars Nilson. Since 1989 the Association has organized conferences every two years starting with Amsterdam and continuing with Strassbourg, Budapest, Venice, Berlin, Edinburgh, Athens and this year Stockholm.

I remember the excitement at the first conference when young scholars prepared to stand up and give their presentations. And this buzz of young colleagues talking about their projects with great intensity was also the hallmark of this conference. Scholars came from a great variety of disciplines involved in urban studies. There were historians, geographers, sociologists, art historians and architectural historians, economists and planners.

It was Professor Lars Nilson, Director for the Institute of Urban History in Stockholm who, with his colleagues Mats Berglund and Nils Fabiansson, hosted the successful event. Some 475 scholars presented papers and participated in discussions in 59 different sessions. These sessions were structured into main sessions, specialist sessions and round table discussions.

The organizers were greatly helped by the excellent conference facilities on the Stockholm University Campus, notably an *Aula Magna* surrounded on different floors by a host of small seminar rooms and connected buildings serving as restaurant or larger lecture rooms.

The theme of this year's conference, 'Urban Europe in Comparative Perspective', was also the topic of Professor Sverker Sörlin's introductory lecture. The comparative aspect in most sessions consisted of the geographical spread of the speakers and the difference in their historical experience. The titles of the main sessions included:

- Material culture in the city
- Urban environmental history
- Changing urban space: central and eastern European cities from the late-nineteenth century to the inter-war years
- Architecture and urban space as vehicles for the creation of cosmopolitan cities in the Mediterranean basin: 1459-1920
- The topographical expression of marketing in small European towns

- Urban history and ideas about heritage and museums
- Early modern cultural history of the street
- Mourning urban change: testimonies of disaster and urban catastrophe since 1945
- Tower and slab
- Jewish space and the construction of urban identity in Morocco.

Many of the topics had little to do with urban morphology. Questions of urban culture in its various manifestations and environmental history, which attracted most speakers, captured the imagination. The only session most directly connected to urban morphology, entitled 'Shapes of selling', was well attended.

Some participants considered that there was a problem of fragmentation. But fragmentation reflects what urban historians of all shapes do these days. It appears to me that it would be a real challenge for the European Association for Urban History to attempt to develop a methodology and theory of comparative urban studies. About 30 years ago I travelled from Dublin to Leicester to discuss with Professor Peter Clark directions for research students working on urban topics. There and then he recommended the comparative approach. Much empirical work has been done since then, but the theoretical underpinning is still missing.

Participants who had not been to Stockholm before were fascinated by the experience of Stockholm as a city, where historical structures and modernity coexist in close proximity. The public transport system was the envy of many of us. There were organized tours of the medieval town and Södermalm, the eighteenth-century merchant and craftsmen's town, the modern city, Stockholm's archipelago, and the 'Museum of Medieval Stockholm'.

Professor Denis Menjot, who has invited the Association to the Ninth Conference on Urban History in Lyons in 2008, will have a hard act to follow. My parting note is that the detailed conference programme with an index of all participants and their full addresses will be most useful for future contact with urban scholars.

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## Annual meeting of CISPOT, Carmignano, Italy, 17-18 November 2006

The sixteenth-century Villa Medicea of Artimino, in the Comune of Carmignano, Prato, gave hospitality to the eighteenth meeting of CISPOT.

The theme treated on the first day was *The Tenth 'Biennale di Architettura' of Venice: critical considerations*. The section of the Biennale entitled *Città di Pietra*, edited by C. D'Amato, was analysed in detail. After a report by A. Petruccioli, some of the architects participating in the competition *Progetto Sud* presented their projects.

Of the four themes presented by the organizers, the planning of the multi-religious centre of Punta Perotti in Bari was particularly appreciated. A. Natalini pointed out the relation with water, in line with his Dutch projects; E. Bordogna (G. Canella's group) chose the fantastic church represented in a Bellini picture as a model; and M. Ieva (A.V. Riondino's group) worked on some typical elements of the Romanic architecture of Puglia. Later P. Buontempi, A. Pacciani and E. Genovesi explained their projects.

The last contributions of the day were those by G. Cataldi, who participated in all the themes, co-ordinating four groups. Starting from common basic principles, each team developed a different project concerned with the urban fabric and the definition of a homogeneous structural system. The discussion closed with G. Muratore's criticism of the excessive influence that the world of finance

and speculation exerted on this Biennale edition. Concluding the day, R. Pasqualetti and M. Maretto presented the architectural reviews *Architetture delle Province* and *Aion*.

The theme treated on the morning of the second day was *Carmignano: 'survey' and projects*. A collaboration between the Comune of Carmignano and the Universities of Florence and Rome, whose purpose is the survey of the Carmignano territory, has produced some preliminary results, and these were presented by G. Cataldi and T. Londi. In addition, G. Cavallina illustrated contemporary examples of residential building in historical centres and rural areas.

Of particular importance was the theme dealt with during the afternoon of the second day, *Towards the constitution of the Italian Group of Urban Morphology*. The creation of this Italian group within ISUF was proposed by G.L. Maffei. The group would co-ordinate and represent at an international level the typo-morphological studies developed in Italy each year. This proposal was welcomed with great enthusiasm by all those present, and it was decided to organize an inaugural convention in Rome early in 2007.

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## Towards a new ISUF programme? Conference on Nordic and international urban morphology, Stockholm, Sweden, 3-6 September 2006

This conference was hosted by the newborn Nordic Network of Urban Morphology in collaboration with ISUF. It attracted about 100 participants from all over the world to exchange the latest advances in urban morphology. The centrepieces of the meeting, following the welcoming speeches of the organizers and the city planners from Stockholm on the first day, were two full days of presentations, comprising four keynote addresses and about 50 papers. Three parallel sessions were held in the wonderful library of the Royal Institute of Technology, situated in an inner fringe belt of the city. On the fourth day, some of the participants completed their stay under the Nordic light with field trips to the suburbs of Stockholm. To stimulate the discussions, there were also three other high spots: the introduction to the meeting and its ice-breaker cocktails in the lounge of the School of Architecture and two official dinners, the first organized by the Nordic Network and ISUF, and the second hosted by the City of Stockholm in the sumptuous City Hall (Figure 1).

The papers and associated discussions were in many ways characteristic of the richness and highly participatory atmosphere of the whole meeting. Despite there being simultaneous sessions it was possible to distil from the great range of papers, and by dissecting the presentations of the keynote speakers, a set of primary problems for future developments in urban morphology and some guidelines for surviving unharmed in a journey through the complexities of urban morphology as it matures as an interdisciplinary field. In fact I was reminded of the occasion, nearly 100 years earlier at the conference of the International Mathematical Society in 1900, when German mathematician David Hilbert presented a set of '23 problems' which it might be argued decided the evolution of his discipline for the next century.

Three main topics were discussed in Stockholm that could well form a basis for future debates: practical use of urban morphological theories, regionalization of urban morphological research, and communication of urban morphological knowledge.

The practical use of theories seemed to worry many of the users of morphological results, perhaps even more than the producers of this precise knowledge. Here we are again, as in Robert Frost's poem, in front of 'the road not taken', not knowing

what to answer. Should urban morphology be led by the needs of urban policies and practitioners? Or should its research continue to be largely independent, following its own way? It seems pertinent to ask which is the road 'less traveled' and whether this road is a good one. If we take into account that most of the papers presented were case studies of singular places and times and some others were about theoretical issues (working on the *principia* or fundamental morphological concepts introduced by either M.R.G. Conzen or G. Caniggia), then it may be appropriate to subscribe to the thesis of a more 'practical' urban morphology, developing more normative studies and less positive ones. However, when looking at some present-day developments in the urban landscape, it is easy to see the gap between the increasing knowledge provided by historico-geographical studies and the heuristic and highly normative approaches of contemporary urban planners. In this case, looking at the historical depth of city form may seem like peering into 'the undergrowth'. In any case, we shall not be able to answer the complex question as to whether it is more relevant to create a theory of past and present practices or to put present and past theories into 'good practice'. Nevertheless, we should not forget that ramblers on the divergent roads may finally find a crossroads leading them to a unique or, at least, more integrated theory. Such is the interdisciplinary venture of future urban morphological studies.

With regard to the regionalization of urban morphological research there is a kind of political ambiguity within ISUF. We can salute the wonderful effort made by the Nordic researchers to create a regional network for discussing morphological issues but, at the same time, it is impossible not to regret being unable to consolidate the internationalism of the discipline inside ISUF. We shall soon have an Italian Network, and then certainly a *réseau français*, and eventually perhaps have so many small sub-networks as to practically recreate the original patchwork structure. Alternatively, from a more pessimistic point of view, the idea of an International Network may collapse and fundamental concepts will cease to be discussed in a worldwide forum that is the very essence of ISUF. The multi-linguistic problem certainly adds to the confusion, English having



**Figure 1. The reception at Stockholm City Hall, preceding the dinner hosted by the City of Stockholm (photograph by Marina Botta).**

been the closest to a common denominator so far. The problems of introducing *nuances* into urban morphological concepts and giving greater importance to the regional schools of thought is still unresolved.

Finally, with regard to the communication of urban morphological knowledge, I should like to consider here a kind of synthesis of the two previous topics. In the lack of focus in transmitting our knowledge to a larger audience of know-how actors there is a certain fragility in our discipline. Hitherto, the main streams of communication of urban morphological knowledge have been excellent academic products: scientific papers (inside or outside the journal *Urban Morphology*), books and teaching. We now need to find another kind of language to provide for a wider public the means of understanding and using the richness of

urban form. This requires other skills: it is to be hoped that through exploration of new multi-disciplinary combinations there will emerge a new kind of expertise.

Without attempting to provide a conclusive response to these open questions, this remarkable conference highlighted the eagerness to explore epistemological and practical issues in urban morphology. We look forward to continuing this memorable discussion under another magical light, in Brazil, at the next ISUF conference.

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## Visual planning and urbanism in the mid-twentieth century

A conference on this theme will be held on 13-15 September 2007 at the University of Newcastle, UK. It will consider some of the key ideas of visual planning and approaches to urbanism of the period, with a particular focus on the contribution of visual and three-dimensional planning as a means of achieving a reformulation of urbanism. This forms part of an AHRC project focusing on the planner Thomas Sharp. The three main paper

themes are 'Visual planning and urbanism in the UK including the Townscape movement', 'Visual planning and urbanism: international perspectives', and 'The work and life of Thomas Sharp'.

Those interested in attending should contact Laura Fernandez (Laura.Fernandez@ncl.ac.uk). The registration cost is £50 (before 25 May; £75 thereafter) and University accommodation is available at £22 per night.

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## Townscape and heritage conservation: construction and reception of urban images, Dresden, Germany, 19-20 January 2007

The title of this conference, in the original German, was *StadtBild und Denkmalpflege – Konstruktion und Rezeption von Bildern der Stadt*. The German word *StadtBild* is usually translated into English as ‘townscape’, literally consisting of the components ‘town’ and ‘image’. Through altering its presentation, beginning both components with a capital letter – *StadtBild* – the word acquires a very subtle but significant extension of its meaning, which goes beyond the traditional understanding of townscape.

This two-day conference, organized by the Institute for Building History, Architectural Theory and Heritage Conservation (IBAD) and the MA course for Heritage Conservation and Urban Planning of the Technical University in Dresden, brought together scholars and practitioners from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The disciplines of art and architectural history, urban design and town planning were represented, as were geography and sociology. All attendees were united by a shared interest in the relationship between urban images and matters of urban conservation and preservation.

The city of Dresden formed a most suitable background for this topic. A persistent image of the ‘Old Dresden’ after its substantial destruction during and after the Second World War resulted not only in the recently completed reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, which had survived as a ruin and indeed had formed a substantial part of the townscape of Dresden since 1743, but also in an increasingly popular movement to rebuild seemingly authentic baroque plans and buildings around it. This approach has more in common with new urbanism and pastiches than with heritage conservation.

Recent theories of heritage conservation, especially in the German-speaking world, have largely rejected the concept of the image as part of their methodology. It has also been neglected by architecture and urban design in favour of the modernist notions of function and space. These disciplines have, however, extended this debate by drawing attention to the influence of postmodernism and the iconic turn. For the discipline of heritage conservation it seems particularly difficult to accept the popular demand for a ‘beautiful’ image, because it implies the departure from real, physically existing fabric, on which its whole existence is based. Thus the

organizers of this event were entering controversial territory.

The aim of this conference was first to follow the genesis, production and media-political impact of urban images, and to analyse their function and their powers of persuasion and the desires, which are articulated through them. This then established the basis for a comparison of the image with the ‘real’ urban space and the consequences particularly for the real urban heritage.

In order to achieve this, the conference was divided into two sections. On the first day, papers were presented under the heading ‘Construction and perception of urban images’. Various concepts and ideas of how images of cities were produced throughout history revealed how, since antiquity, visual images were not mere depictions of a survey-like analysis of reality, but tools of propaganda, vision and persuasion. Even attempts like Alberti’s to overcome the arbitrariness of visual images by devising a digital system of mapping were not free from subjective values. The urban visions of the modern movement dealt with the old town through negation, polarization or fragmentation and recycling.

The second day was dedicated to ‘The role of urban images in heritage conservation and in contemporary urban design’. Here it was particularly interesting to see how heritage conservation, despite its insistence on the authentic fabric, had at various stages of its history made use of the image – how it had always existed in the conflict between the real and the ideal image of the town. Yet it became very clear that the real urban fabric continues to struggle against the image, which is partly fed by unreliable evidence and partly by marketing visions.

Like all conferences, far from finding answers, this was a forum for exchange and lively discussion. When the participants stepped out of the venue, the dome of the Frauenkirche across the River Elbe reminded everybody of the power of the *StadtBild*.

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