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## **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. CISPOT (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.**

subjective. To me it is always impressive to meet representatives of different languages and traditions of thought confining themselves to one language of expression – here English, the mother tongue of a small minority of participants.

A very considerable number of presentations were received as highly valuable, with some remaining partly hidden within their own intellectual cloaks, whether for reasons of time available to present, status of development, or choice. In short, it may superficially and unfairly be said that often methodology was presented with little reference to practical application, and where there were practical applications there was little methodology.

The three keynote lectures provided a richly-woven web of theory and praxis as personally reflected and interpreted by senior colleagues. It is hoped that articles based on these presentations may appear in our excellent journal in due course.

### 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 use of terms across languages remains challenging, whether in translated international texts or in oral presentation in the intimate environment of a seminar such as that at Artimino. Such a challenge is of course hardly ever not evident when representatives of different academic fields and traditions meet. Maybe future conferences could allow some parallel activity on the meaning of terms and concepts as a contribution to expanding shared ground?

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.



**Figure 2. The conference banquet.**

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, CISPOT 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.

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## ISUF business meetings, Artimino, Italy, November 2008

Meetings of the Council and Editorial Board of ISUF took place on Friday 21 and Saturday 22 November 2008, during the ISUF annual conference. A General Meeting of ISUF took place at the end of the conference. This report covers the main matters discussed at the three meetings. Additional comments are made about the General Meeting in the report of the conference by Amund Sinding-Larsen (this issue, pp. 67-9).

### Secretary-General's report

Professor Nicola Marzot affirmed that the pattern of ISUF conferences was to hold large and small conferences in alternate years. The conference in Artimino was planned as a small conference to follow the large and very successful conference held in Ouro Preto, Brazil in 2007.

The conference in 2009 would be held at South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China, 4-7 September. There would be excursions both during the conference and afterwards in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong. A proposal by Professor Jürgen Lafrenz to host the conference in 2010 in Hamburg, Germany had been accepted. A number of venues were under consideration for 2011.

The annual conferences were particularly important for the exchange of views between the different disciplines represented in ISUF. The pursuit of a better understanding of these differing perspectives had engendered much lively debate in Artimino. It was intended to maintain this tradition at the much larger conference in Guangzhou.

### Treasurer's report

Dr Keith Lilley was unable to attend the meetings but submitted a written report and accounts. These indicated that ISUF's finances were healthy. However, for the year 2007/8 expenditure exceeded receipts. An increase in expenditure was related to two principal factors. One was the increase in the cost of distribution of the journal resulting from the large number of new members who achieved membership as a result of attending the conference in Ouro Preto – the income from that conference had not entirely covered this extra cost. The other was the use of colour in the journal which had significantly increased the cost of production.

ISUF's main expenditure continued to be the production and distribution of the journal.

Thanks were expressed to Keith Lilley for his custodianship of ISUF finances over the past 4 years. Dr Michael Barke was welcomed as the new Treasurer. He commented on the relatively good state of ISUF finances but was aware of the need to monitor the increasing costs involved in the production of the journal and the running of the website.

### Editor's report

Professor Jeremy Whitehand reported that this was the twelfth year of the journal. *Urban Morphology* was well established in the main abstracting journals and indexes, including the ISI Web of Knowledge. More than 150 libraries worldwide received the journal as did all individual members. ISUF had received more approaches from commercial publishers wishing to publish and distribute the journal on its behalf, but it had been decided to retain production of the journal in-house. This had made it possible for both individual and library subscriptions to continue at the present low level. A disadvantage was that ISUF lacked the publicity apparatus of the main commercial publishers.

It was reported that there had been some improvement in attracting good quality articles by contributors from outside Europe and America. Of the twelve full-length articles published in the last three issues of *Urban Morphology*, eight were by authors based in Europe and America and four by authors elsewhere in the world.

Access to the journal through the website was available for the early issues (up to and including 2001). Library subscribers also had access to recent issues online.

The flow of manuscripts submitted to the journal remained good, although the quality was very variable. For Volume 12, the average time lag between receipt of revised manuscript and publication was a little less than 6 months. The number of book reviews was fewer than the Editorial Board felt was desirable. A great deal of research in urban morphology and related fields was published in books and the international journal should reflect this. Dr Piper Gaubatz was nearing completion of her term as Book Review Editor and Dr Ian Morley would shortly be

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replacing her. Members of the Editorial Board had agreed to supply the Book Review Editor with details of possible books for review.

#### Other business

Improvements had been made in the way members' addresses were stored and it was hoped that this would facilitate more effective communications during 2009.

Professor Giuseppe Strappa reported that ISUF Italia, inaugurated in March 2007, had 37 members, mostly with Muratorian interests. There had been two meetings to date and these had been reported in *Urban Morphology*.

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### **'Beijing Map Games: Contemporary Art and Architecture in Beijing', at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham, UK, 18 October 2008 - 4 January 2009**

Birmingham's nineteenth-century Museum & Art Gallery hosted a groundbreaking exhibition of contemporary art and architecture entitled 'Beijing Map Games' in late 2008. This exhibition offered a number of 'cuts' through the contemporary city, considering how different aspects of city life have been conceptualized by a diverse range of artists in order to identify specific themes which appear to offer the basis for constructing urban accounts fit for contemporary times. The Beijing Map Games thus represented a forward-looking collection designed to suggest where urban representations may be heading – yet in doing so it also offered a critical reflection on where they have been.

There was some overlap between the works on display, most of which covered themes current in urban morphology. For instance, Ma Yansong explored some of the more challenging issues surrounding the changing role of Beijing, not least its role in addressing current environmental concerns. He advocated the installation of a green arterial line in the middle of the city, thus providing an escape from the city's stifling everyday life.

Questions of historicity were addressed through reflections on the role of memory, and there was a particular focus on the city as a palimpsest on which successive generations have imposed their identities and ideologies. Tang Hui, for instance, investigated the dichotomy between private and public space, and focused on another dimension of the history of Beijing: the way in which past city orders are never obliterated, but remain apparent in sites of memorialization. He considered the role of statuary and memorials as an obvious testament to some histories but not others.

Related to this, *Identity* by Marcella Campa and Duliao Studio (Figure 1) suggested that it is by

considering such questions of inhabitation that we begin to sense how the city is pregnant with possibility – a melting pot of different subjectivities and identities. As their work illustrated, modernization is an inevitably contested process: the dissolution of kinship ties and the erosion of community as a result of the redevelopment of the *hutong* districts in Beijing contrasts with the rationally planned city intended to achieve a distance from the confusing reality of the ancient districts. Devoting attention to the differential and conflictual production of space and time thus casts theories of modernization in a different light.

One of the key debates in studies of urban change concerns questions of city formation and the relationship between historical and new forms. Processes of urban transformation are an important theme explored by architect Wang Hui in *Place by Displacement*, which consisted of a large map of Beijing made up of several photocopied sheets of historical maps that could be torn off by visitors to the exhibition to reveal new layers. This intriguing exhibit encouraged us to reflect on the multiple roles that the city has had over time, and in particular, to consider the changing role of Beijing in the industrial and post-industrial eras. Moreover, this work sheds light on the way in which the city is being continually reproduced through exceptional combinations of ideology and context: it demonstrates how successive generations of architects and planners have shaped urban form, and how the city has been modelled and remodelled to reflect dominant ideas of the time. Wang Hui's work also reminds us that the interplay of science and technology has become an increasingly important influence on urban form, with webs of new transport technology allowing the outward

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**Figure 1. *Identity*: exhibit of personal identity seals from a *hutong* district under redevelopment: as a *hutong* is demolished, a seal is removed. Reproduced by courtesy of *offiCina beijing* ([www.officinaltd.com](http://www.officinaltd.com)) and the artists.**

expansion of the Beijing inner core.

Many of the artists attempted to capture the ambivalence of urban space and the maelstrom of change that typify the recent wave of developments within Beijing. Efforts to impose an order on this complexity are sometimes associated with the state and law, and are often tied into notions of criminality and immorality (and that which is considered to be ‘out of place’ in the new city). Lin Yilin’s work, in particular, hinted at exposing these themes. Yet not all ordering was represented in this exhibition as being oppressive. Najjar’s E-topian city of bits envisioned the future and Winy Maas suggested evolutionary urban planning perspectives that involve synergic participation of citizens. Arguably, working through the play of forces in this way ultimately results in an ‘urban order’ which allows the viewer to reflect on both the city that has been and the city that might be.

Other artists explored the selective histories of mapping. Varvara Shavrova, for example, in her drawing and painting installation, charted the transformation of Beijing over the centuries and used declassified CIA maps from the 1970s and 1980s as a fossilized imprint of the city’s past that is still visible in the present. Urban mapping in this

regard encourages us to conceive the city in different ways; given that such mapping emphasizes certain places, but suppresses others, it encapsulates a particular ‘way of seeing’.

*They ...*, a photographic work by Wang Jianwei, presented an interesting observation of a city space: one of Beijing’s multi-level motorway interchanges populated by pedestrians rather than vehicles. Although this particular space is conceived and planned as a site for high-speed traffic circulation, Jianwei’s artistic interpretation suggested that the occupation of this junction using pedestrian figures can actually challenge this dominant representation. In this sense, the tendency to view the city in this way contrasts markedly with the architect/planners’ view, which conceives traffic junctions not as a place where people meet, but as points that facilitate the efficient, legible, space of flows for goods, people and capital. Arguably, Jianwei’s artistic intervention seeks to subvert and subvert ‘traditional’ understandings of this particular urban site; the pedestrians on the interchange represent an *interruption* to the humdrum routine of city life, where the repetitious daily movement of the motor car predominates. We are reminded that, in any consideration of urban morphology, we need to be more attentive towards *spaces of representation* – ‘space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 912) – which oppose official *representations of space* and raise key questions about who has the right to use the contemporary city (Shields, 1999, p. 164).

The contribution of Ai Weiwei – the artistic consultant responsible for the design of the ‘Bird’s Nest’ stadium – was a video entitled ‘Beijing: the second ring’ which showed two opposite views of traffic flow on 33 bridges along Beijing’s second ring road. Whilst the film drew the viewer’s attention to the historic elements of the city, and its modern development, it also reminded us of Marshall Berman’s (1983) remark that, from the perspective of the pedestrian, the distribution of goods and products in the ‘freeway era’ has transformed the entire urban scene into a ‘moving chaos’ (Berman, 1983, p. 159). This high-modernist obsession with generalized mobility is perfectly captured in Weiwei’s piece.

The ‘dehumanizing’ effects of grand road building projects that expedite flow have, of course, been held up as exemplary of the deleterious impact that technology and speed have had on social life (Benjamin, 1999). Weiwei’s interpretation also raised questions over how the physical channels of movement in the city – along which people, goods,

and traffic can circulate – have been increasingly supplemented by *virtual* connections (that is, innovations in data storage, processing and transmission, such as fax technology, mobile telephony, intranet and internet connections). In his example, closed circuit TV (CCTV) cameras have been used as a medium to observe the flow of two opposing streams of traffic. This, of course, chimes with broader debates that surround CCTV and notions of control in today's urban environment. Furthermore, his observational study raises the spectre of cities being managed and regulated by a faceless and unverifiable technology.

In an era that badly needs to challenge the complacency of current urban thinking, the contemporary art and architecture explored by the contributors to the Beijing Map Games are important because of the questions they raise about representation, imagination, and participation, which are all crucial themes in explaining our senses of urban possibilities. Urban morphology is perhaps also haunted by the legacies of previous times: in this exhibition several of the works on display unpick some of these legacies and manage to pose some provocative questions about the city we want to see in the future.

## Acknowledgement

'Beijing Map Games' is a curatorial creative collaboration between independent curator Feng Boyi, Monica Piccioni and Rosario Scarpato (offiCina art project space co-founders) and artist Varvara Shavrova.

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## Revitalizing built environments

A symposium entitled 'Revitalizing built environments: requalifying old places for new uses' will be held in Istanbul, Turkey, 12-16 October 2009. It is the fourth of a series of international symposia organized by the International Association of People-Environment Studies. Papers will consider key theoretical and methodological issues and post-occupancy evaluations. They will include case studies that

illustrate specific principles and methods, and examples of best practice, in relation to: residential buildings in the public and private sectors; private industrial and commercial buildings; public spaces and landmarks in urban and rural localities; and industrial sites, derelict land and green space. Further information is available from the symposium website: [www.culturespace2009.org](http://www.culturespace2009.org)

## Seventh International Space Syntax Symposium

The Seventh International Space Syntax Symposium will take place in Stockholm, Sweden, 8-11 June 2009. There are a number of themes concerned with 'Urban and architectural analysis' and 'Cities and buildings'. The symposium will begin with a half-day 'special event', focusing on the importance of space syntax for architectural practice. Slussen, the most complex architectural project in Stockholm, will be a focus of discussion: architects currently competing on the project have been invited to take part in a debate on the future of

architectural knowledge.

A key feature of the Symposium is the thematic seminar in which central themes in space syntax are the focus of discussion and reflection. There will also be thematic walks in central Stockholm guided by local experts on, for example, architectural history, economic urban development and important Swedish architects. For further information contact the organizing committee at [info@SSS7.org](mailto:info@SSS7.org)

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