

## 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](http://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).**

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**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](http://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

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*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](mailto:kiril.stanilov@ucl.ac.uk)*

## ISUF Business meetings, Hamburg, Germany, August 2010

Meetings of the Council and Editorial Board of ISUF took place on Thursday 19 August in Hamburg. A General Meeting of ISUF took place during the conference. This report summarizes the principal matters covered in the three meetings.

### Secretary-General's report

The Secretary-General, Nicola Marzot, reported that ISUF conferences continued to be very successful events, with large and small conferences taking place in alternate years. Venues such as Ouro Preto (Brazil), Artimino (Italy), Guangzhou (China), and now Hamburg had opened the work of ISUF to a wider spectrum of people. ISUF Italia was playing a major part in the organization of the celebrations for the Muratorian Centennial. There would be events at six different venues in Italy. ISUF and the journal *Urban Morphology* had made significant contributions to achieving an international audience for the work of Muratori and Caniggia.

Nicola Marzot informed delegates that he was retiring from the position of Secretary-General and that Council had appointed Kai Gu, University of Auckland, as his successor. The new Secretary-General would commence his 4-year term of office at the end of the conference.

### Treasurer's report

The Treasurer, Michael Barke, reported on the sound state of ISUF finances. This was attributable in large part to two very successful conferences – Artimino in 2008 and Guangzhou in 2009. However, with the continuing increase in ISUF's operating costs it had been agreed at the meeting in Guangzhou to increase the subscription rates for 2011. The annual subscription for individual members would increase to £25 and for institutional members to £50. He reported that there was an encouraging increase in the number of subscribing libraries.

The President, Michael Conzen, pointed out that subscription rates were very low when compared with those of most scientific and learned societies. This was made possible by the large contribution that unpaid helpers made to the running of the organization.

### Editor's report

The Editor, Jeremy Whitehand, reported that *Urban Morphology*, was now in its fourteenth year. It had been included in the main databases, notably the ISI Web of Knowledge, for many years and there was a healthy number of citations of the journal's articles. More than 200 libraries worldwide currently subscribed to the journal.

The flow of manuscript submissions continued to rise, but accepted articles were published rapidly. About one in every four articles submitted was accepted for publication. The average time-lag between receipt of revised manuscript and publication was about 5 months. Judged by the range of countries in which authors of articles were based, the journal was proving attractive internationally, but submissions of articles by authors based in Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Russia were markedly under-represented. Since English was not the first language of many authors, improving the quality of expression was a major part of the editing process. An increasing number of books in non-Romance and non-Germanic languages were being reviewed.

Sael Alveranga de Pereira Costa and Julienne Hanson were retiring from the Editorial Board, both having served two terms. Appreciation was expressed for their valuable contributions. They had been replaced by Vítor Oliveira and Paul Hess.

### Website

Elwin Koster, who had been in charge of the website since its inception in 1997, had reported to the previous Council meeting that he would be retiring from his position as Webmaster in 2010. Council had expressed its indebtedness to him for the great amount of work he had put into the website over such an extended period. Discussions with three potential successors had taken place in the course of the year but no appointment had been made. Richard Whitehand, a website specialist based in Sweden, had offered to take over responsibility for the website for the time being free of charge. He would begin by reviewing the condition of the website with a view to its restructuring and updating. Michael Conzen considered that the time might be approaching when it would be necessary to pay for maintenance of the website.

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## Future conferences

It was confirmed that conferences would be held in Montréal in August 2011 (further information available from Pierre Gauthier – e-mail: isuf2011@alcor.concordia.ca), and in Delft in June 2012 (this has subsequently been changed to September: further information available from

Nicola Marzot – e-mail: N.Marzot@tudelft.nl).

*Susan M. Whitehand, Urban Morphology Research Group, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. E-mail: smwhitehand@hotmail.co.uk*

## ISUF Italia: a progress report

The idea of forming national and regional ISUF 'networks' was put forward in 2004 at the ISUF conference in Newcastle upon Tyne. The need for such a development was especially felt by a number of Italian members of ISUF. This need reflected in part the origins of ISUF which was largely born out of an acknowledgement of the affinities (in methods, goals, and even some didactical traditions) between two schools: one related to the work of the Anglo-German geographer M. R. G. Conzen, and the other to the school of thought stemming from the work of the Italian architects S. Muratori and G. Caniggia. A remarkable number of studies on these similarities were made in the following years. Conzen studied the townscape and territory as a physiognomy resulting from patterns in land use, building form and ground plan; Muratori and Caniggia investigated the same forms as a basis for re-designing the urban tissue, the townscape and the territory. It is not by chance that most of the British and American ISUF members are geographers and most of the Italian ones are architects. Much of the success of ISUF can, in my opinion, be attributed to this interaction of different perspectives. The desirability of developing further this aspect of ISUF through the development of national and regional groups became even more evident with the increasing number of members belonging to different disciplines, schools of thought and geographical areas.

The official foundation of ISUF Italia took place in Rome on 23-24 March 2007 in the main hall of *Casa dell'Architettura*, a well-known municipal institution. The first day was devoted to the morphology of modern public housing in Rome. The low-cost experimental quarters built in the 1960s and 1970s are often costly to maintain. The subject is relevant to the Italian typological school as this period is one in which the very notion of urban fabric as an organic relationship between building types and route structure was abandoned. The 1 km long Corviale building is an extreme

product of this crisis, symbolizing, in architectural form, the failure to solve a social, urban and economic problem. An oversized interpretation of the *unità d'habitation* ideology, it was planned for 8000 inhabitants and intended as a small town containing apartments, internal streets, services and shops but, again for typo-morphological reasons, never fulfilled its goals. During the discussion, opposing recommendations were put forward by public and scientific authorities in the field, ranging from the total demolition of the Corviale building to its preservation as 'cultural heritage'. ISUF members proposed transforming and humanizing the building as part of the same typological process through which ancient tissues were transformed to meet the requirements of modern inhabitants. The discussion, reported by national newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *L'Unità*, *Il Manifesto*, *Il Secolo d'Italia* and *Il Tempo*, 24 March 2004), was wide and inspiring.

On the following day the inauguration of ISUF Italia took place. Gian Luigi Maffei, as President of ISUF, explained the aim of the new association, pointing out the opportunity for co-operative effort to establish our point of view as an alternative to the current 'globalized' architecture, mostly influenced by the methods of the visual arts. The subsequent debate confirmed the interest in the proposal by a number of architects, not all of them belonging to the Muratorian school.

In the subsequent years the association organized or supported meetings, workshops and conferences concerned with the main questions posed by the typological school. The discussion about the problem of the modern housing types in Roman growth areas, for example, was continued in a series of meetings held in the Valle Giulia Faculty of Architecture, with the authors of some of the new quarters as guests, and in workshops organized with municipal and local authorities.

The question of 'reading' and designing new architecture for historical centres was considered of

crucial importance and workshops were organized by Alessandro Camiz in conjunction with the Faculties of Architecture of Rome-Sapienza and Miami (Camiz, 2011), and by Alessandro Merlo in Aramo in conjunction with the Faculties of Architecture of Firenze, Genova and Ferrara (Merlo and Lavoratti, 2008). The workshops concluded that *inter alia* such commonly employed terms as 'preservation', 'protection', and 'safeguard of historical centres', which suggested a passive attitude in defending fabric specific features, should be replaced by such terms as 'forming process', 'continuity', and 'updating'.

The most recent event organized by ISUF's Florentine members, was the celebration of the centenary of the birth of Saverio Muratori. A conference was held in Modena, Muratori's birthplace, on 22-23 October 2010, sponsored by the Municipality and CISPOT. Various aspects of the complex personality of the master were examined in different sessions. Muratori's oldest scholar, Alessandro Giannini, gave a synthetic, deep interpretation of the recent discovering of the theories of Muratori as the 'call for universal, integral consciousness, the exploration of the worldwide rule'. Muratori, added Giannini, was not searching for a way for architecture to adhere to reality but, on the contrary, he was investigating the 'architectonicity' of reality, the way we can read it

in an architectural structure. This distinguishes the Muratorian way of investigating the built landscape. Further celebrations will take place including in Florence, Roma, Genoa, Milan and Delft.

Although ISUF Italia adopted a Constitution at its conception, it has tended to remain an informal association. Apart from practical aspects, such as organizing meetings, the existence of an association of researchers with common aims and similar methods, stimulates activities and gives identity to ISUF members working in the controversial climate of Italian contemporary architecture.

## References

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Giuseppe Strappa, Facoltà d'Architettura 'Valle Giulia', Università degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza', via A. Gramsci 53, 00197 Roma, Italy.  
E-mail: gstrappa@yahoo.com

## Tenth International Conference on Urban History, Ghent, Belgium, 1-4 September 2010

The Tenth International Conference on Urban History took place in the historic St. Peter's Abbey in Ghent. Its theme was 'City and society in European history', but this report is confined to the session on 'Buildings as historical evidence: the changing city, 1700-1950'. The organizers of this session Colum Giles and Allan Brodie – both from English Heritage – stimulated an eventually intriguing session with a somewhat bold statement: 'The physical form of the city – its landscapes, open spaces and buildings – has been used to illustrate change, but rarely has it been analysed as a source in itself to throw light on how and why cities grow and evolve'.

Such a statement inevitably calls for opposition from those who have for long analysed the physical form of cities, landscapes, and buildings as a source for their research – not least urban morphologists. However, Giles and Brodie also raised three

pertinent questions:

1. What added value can physical evidence give to urban studies?
2. What are the problems with using material evidence?
3. How can this evidence be gathered and applied?

These questions raise others of broader import. The first question addresses the fact that urban morphology itself is worked on by researchers from various backgrounds, though one might ask how far results from this morphological research are exchanged between disciplines? The second question involves the tension between preserving built heritage as a source and conserving its historical appearance (*Stadtbildpflege*). The third question leads into methodology and eventually the complexities of dealing with four-dimensional

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spaces (including time!). These are just a few of the matters that arise from these three questions and seem to be worth more general discussion.

The Ghent session, with its four papers, did address several of these issues. The session began with Karsten Ley's discussion of 'Lennep 1746-1929', in which he sought to illustrate contradictions between the local historiography and the town's physiognomy by means of a combination of town-plan analysis, spatial analysis and architectural analysis. This was followed by Peter Guillery's paper on 'Why are houses interesting?'. This was a consideration of eighteenth-century town houses in London, making use of detailed records and typological research on buildings that are seldom in the focus of architectural history yet must be used to explicate the living environment of that time. Marie Pottecher then explained the growth and transformation of Schiltigheim, a town in the suburban area of Strasbourg. To this end she employed GIS to gather and process archival data as well as architectural surveys and interview records. Finally, Peter Martyn gave a pictorial

narrative entitled 'Comparing the architectural heritage of central Łódź with the largely non-extant urban landscape of pre-1914 Warsaw'. This pinpointed the post-1945 quandary of reconstructing urban showpieces for political and economic reasons while large parts of the historical fabric are sacrificed on similar grounds.

The organizers and speakers quickly came to terms with the profound significance of buildings as historical evidence and the pertinence of different disciplinary viewpoints. Yet, among 66 sessions with a total of 522 speakers, this major conference on urban history devoted only this one 90-minute session to this topic. Fortunately it was attended by a large audience. Perhaps many were attracted by Giles and Bodie's provocative announcement of the session, which thereby served its purpose despite any irritation it caused.

*Karsten Ley, Fakultät für Architektur, RWTH Aachen, Templergraben 49, 52062 Aachen, Germany. E-mail: ley@sbg.arch.rwth-aachen.de*

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