

## Twenty-Second International Seminar on Urban Form, Rome, Italy, 23–26 September 2015

The major ISUF Conference of 2015 had as its principal theme ‘City as organism: new visions for urban life’. It took place in Rome, perhaps one of the most organic cities in history. A remarkable event was therefore anticipated both in respect of discussion topics and venue.

It was indeed a remarkable conference, though by no means entirely in ways anticipated. Many speakers were coy about addressing explicitly the subject of cities as organisms and the sub-theme of ‘new visions for urban life’ was often no more than implicit, at least among the main presentations. Two of the keynote lectures that were arguably exceptions were the introductory presentations by Giuseppe Strappa and Michael Conzen. Strappa explored ‘The city as process: Rome’s urban form in transformation’, using the history of Rome as an example of organic process, emphasizing the rational side of city as organism (such as the metabolism of the city) and giving comparatively little attention to what he called the romantic side of the organic city. In contrast, Conzen’s extension of the organic aspect of the city was his proposal for inclusion of more ecological and environmental methods in the toolbox of ISUF as a fifth (geo-ecological) sub-field: the other four being process-typological, configurational, historico-geographical, and spatial modelling.

Two subsequent keynotes were attractive presentations of contemporary modernist architectural designs, one by Joao Luis Carrilho da Graca on ‘Terra,’ and the other by Max Dudler on ‘Density’. But they did not address the principal theme of the conference.

One can only speculate about the lack of a main-theme introduction to the conference given the fact that organic urban theory is considered one of five major influential approaches in urban theory and design (Lynch, 1984). Could it be that the particular theme of city as organism is a matter of contention between the two otherwise complementary directions of ISUF: Anglo-Saxon urban morphology and the Italian building typology school of thought? Arguably these two approaches have different perspectives concerning the city as organism. A look back to a contribution to *Urban Morphology* in 1998, in which M. R. G. Conzen responds to a comparative analysis of his own and Caniggia’s approach to urban morphology by Nicola Marzot (1998) would seem to support this

interpretation. For in Conzen’s view ‘the existence of a human settlement is a fundamentally different thing from the life of a human individual’ (Conzen, 1998, p. 113), apparently referring to the Caniggian treatment of a city as if it were an organism.

While the biological analogy of the city might be useful to some degree, it seems to be more appropriate and productive to take a modern perspective on the city as organism and the organic city, in which process, change, evolution, connections and complex relationships can provide a more specific and contemporary look at this topic.

Such a modern view can be based on several developments, such as systems theory, morphogenesis, holism, Eastern philosophies, and organicist theory, starting with Plato but continuing in a modern form with Alfred North Whitehead’s completely new process philosophy which he initially called the ‘philosophy of organism’. In this modern perspective, emphasis is on relationships and connections between the many elements in a city, for example activities, people and buildings, and processes within a system (or city) that can be likened to an organism or the organic city because of their life-creating and life-supporting processes on a higher level of organicity than the simple biological analogy. For Whitehead it is actually the relations that are primary: they are what the thing is and how it is defined (Whitehead, 1985, p. 39). In this way we have a world of relationships and processes of unfolding and evolution, forever changing and becoming.

While organicism and the organic city have a long history in writing and design application in the fields of philosophy, architecture, planning, geography, history and other disciplines, in this conference one had to visit as many sessions as possible in order to find more direct and rich discussion of, or references to, the main conference theme. It is also here that we found more visions and suggestions for new urban processes and urban life.

Discussions that were closest to exploring or exemplifying the ideas of an organic approach and theory could be found in the sessions on analysis of historic towns and the design of new towns, but most commonly in those on ecology and the city, the sustainable city, green areas and parks in the city, and open space and squares in the city, as well as a contribution in the session on urban form and

theories. The session on ‘Urban landscapes’ was promising ecologically, including a contribution on ‘New forms of urban space in relation to nature’ by Anna Bruno Menghini.

In a session on urban form and theories, Hajo Neis presented one of the few theories that deal directly with urban form and the creation of urban form in an organic approach with a contemporary perspective. Drawing on the book *A new theory of urban design* (Alexander *et al.*, 1987), the presentation in large part took seriously process-organism theory akin to Whitehead’s philosophy of organism. It demonstrated how a city, or part of a city in this case, can be developed in a totally new way based on practical principles and rules that depend on connections and the right relationships to drive processes that generate dynamic urban growth. He also reported on how similar processes were applied in various other projects around the world.

In the afternoon sessions, several contributions can be highlighted that addressed the issue of city or building as organism in a direct or analogical fashion. ‘The concept of organism in Louis Kahn’s work’ by Elisabeta Barizza was relevant to modern architectural legacies. Pierre Gauthier’s discussion of street networks, spatial configurations and morphogenesis was directly relevant to organic urban structure and development. And Deniz Yilmaz

and Muejigan Karatosun discussed the calming process aspect of ‘Slow city movement as a new approach in urban conservation’.

The second day of the conference was probably the most exciting for sessions and presentations that related in one form or another to city as organism and the organic city. The two sessions on public open space were full of references to the organic city: these included contributions on ‘Public space as the generator of urban form’ by Tarsicio Salcedo, ‘Imagining new forms: urban morphology and design practice’ by Michele Beccu, and the more analytical and historical paper on ‘The Italian plaza: a model for comprehensive analysis’ by Donald Corner and Jenny Young. In the architectural heritage session, Howard Davis reminded us about the importance of production within any city and its impact on architecture in his paper on ‘Industrial morphologies: the historic London furniture industry and the new city of production’. And a day later Gian Luigi Maffei’s paper could be related to this context. He analysed the ‘Relationship between specialized buildings and urban form: changes and transformations of the contemporary world,’ especially in relation to new service building relocation, concluding that a new phase in the organic evolution of cities may be under way.



**Figure 1. Conference participants relax under the Roman gaze. Photograph by Kai Gu.**

One of the most interesting discussions was generated in the evening session on 'Informal settlements', which included contributions on 'Spatial and organizational patterns in informal settlements', 'Understanding the city as a whole', and 'Informality of sprawl? Morphogenetic evolution in post-socialist Tirana'. The discussion addressed the issue of informal settlements as organic urban developments and how to support such a bottom-up direct approach to urban form and life formation. It was not surprising that this discussion was enthusiastically pursued by younger participants in the conference: one-third of urban inhabitants are estimated to live in informal settlements. Discussions on this and many other topics continued in the more relaxed, but historically more evocative, environment of the Gala dinner (Figure 1).

The last day of the conference was mostly dedicated to the new kind of city as organism or organic city that we associate with the green movement, including ecology, landscape, and sustainability of various kinds. Here the sessions on 'Reading contemporary landscape', 'Landscape and territories', 'Sustainable design and technologies', and 'Sustainable design' emphasized the importance of this new aspect of study and design within the ISUF range of interests. It was probably best exemplified by the paper on 'Towards a social-ecological urban morphology: integrating urban form and landscape ecology' by Lars Marcus and Meta Berghauer Pont. Also refreshing was the presentation by Alessandra Capuana on 'For a new organic city' which dealt with the traditional organic city in combination with elements of the new organic city, emphasizing connections, process and change.

In the end one has to ask what is to be learned from this rather fascinating conference with its intriguing, apparently controversial, title. I think we have to advance the notion of the organic city and city as organism to the next level in contemporary understanding. It actually becomes useful in helping to solve some of the huge problems that we are encountering with cities worldwide as we create new visions for urban life. That does not mean that traditional values of the organic city need to be thrown out, for they are still useful in many ways. But the organic city needs to be redefined and extended to become the new organic city: the city as process and relationships.

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## ISUF business meetings, Rome, September 2015

A meeting of the Editorial Board of ISUF took place on Tuesday 22 September 2015 in Rome, immediately before the ISUF conference. Meetings of Council took place on Tuesday 22 and Wednesday 23 September. This report summarizes the main matters covered at those meetings and at the General Meeting of ISUF held during the conference.

### President's report

The President, Giancarlo Cataldi announced that Anna Agata Kantarek and Brenda Scheer had

been elected to Council and Vítor Oliveira had been re-elected. Retiring members Staël de Alvarenga Pereira Costa, Catherine Maumi and Paul Sanders were thanked for their important contributions during their 4 years on Council. A short report was provided on a conference held in Rome in November 2014, preparatory to the main ISUF conference. Funds that had accrued from a number of very successful conferences, particularly the one held in Porto in 2014, would enable support of a number of initiatives, including the work of regional networks.

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### Secretary-General's report

The Secretary-General, Kai Gu invited contributions on various aspects of the organization and development of ISUF. Ivor Samuels, reporting on the progress of the Task Force on Research and Practice, was particularly concerned to promote urban morphology as a resource for practitioners. It was agreed that production of a *Reader in urban morphology*, including a wide range of key publications, was desirable. A proposal by Vítor Oliveira that an Advisory Committee on the Future Development of ISUF be set up received warm approval. It was subsequently agreed by the Executive Committee of ISUF that the Advisory Committee would provide a preliminary report to Council at the ISUF conference in Nanjing in July 2016. Among the matters it would consider was the organization of ISUF, its finances, clarification of an agenda relating to the furtherance of research and practice in urban morphology, publicity, and the relationship between the growing number of ISUF's regional networks.

### Treasurer's report

The Treasurer, Michael Barke reported that ISUF's financial position remained very healthy, despite the fact that the cost of membership to both individuals and institutions remained low relative to that of comparable international organizations. However, the cost of producing the journal was likely to continue to increase. The administration of all aspects of ISUF relied heavily on unpaid staff. A number of organizations of similar size to ISUF or larger have paid staff and it was evident that the time was close when significant organizational changes would need to be made.

### Webmaster's report

The Webmaster, Richard Whitehand reported that there had been an increase of about 25 per cent in the use of the website in comparison with 2013/14. The online journal was the most heavily used part of the site, the most downloaded articles receiving over 200 visits per month. The next most heavily used part of the site was that relating to conferences.

### Editor's report

The Editor, Jeremy Whitehand thanked Giancarlo Cataldi, who was retiring from the Editorial Board and Amund Sinding-Larsen, who would shortly be retiring, for their long, valuable service. He welcomed Meta Berghauser Pont to the Board. A replacement for Amund Sinding-Larsen would be appointed at the end of 2015. Thanks were expressed to the Editorial team and for the invaluable advice received from referees. The proportion of article submissions accepted had continued to be about 20 per cent. In 2014/15 the mean time-lag between the receipt of an article and the communication of a decision to the author was about 3 weeks. The average time-lag between the receipt of a revised version of an article and its publication was about 5 months. Authors continued to be widely spread geographically. As from the beginning of 2016, Henry Ling Ltd, who had been printing the journal almost since its beginning, would take over responsibility for typesetting. There was no support at present for employing a commercial publisher. Attention was drawn to the fact that publicity for the journal was minimal, as indeed it was for ISUF more generally.

### Future conferences

The conference scheduled to take place in Nanjing in July 2016 was reported to be attracting wide interest. Conference themes would include research and practice, East-West comparisons, the fringe-belt concept, and urban form in Asia. Proposals for hosting future conferences were received from Spain (Valencia), Cyprus (Nicosia), Russia (Krasnoyarsk) and Turkey (Istanbul). It was agreed that Valencia would host the conference in 2017, and that the other three proposals would be carried forward for consideration at the next meeting of Council. It was also agreed that the guidance for proposals to hold conferences would be revised.

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## Second International Seminar on Urban Spaces, Krakow, Poland, 9 December 2015

This Second International Seminar on Urban Spaces held in Krakow provided further evidence of enhanced interest in urban morphology in Poland. It was organized by the Division of Urban Spaces, Krakow University of Technology and the Urban Morphology Section, Commission on Urban Planning and Architecture, of the Krakow Branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences as the first stage in establishing an ISUF Polish Network.

Studies in Poland relating to urban morphology are founded on the achievements of the Łódź school of historical geography as developed by M. Koter and M. Kulesza, whose work is a direct continuation of the approach developed by M. R. G. Conzen. However, many professionals and academics – archaeologists, historians, art historians, architects, geographers, spatial planners, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists – refer in their work to the concepts of urban morphology without reference to the work of the internationally recognized morphological schools – British, Italian and French. The growing awareness of the methodological benefits deriving from these morphological schools and the potential to undertake creative work that brings together their results has led to the idea of consolidating that part of the scientific community in Poland that has interests in urban morphology.

A major aim of the seminar was to familiarize academics with the main founders of the British and Italian schools and to present a range of Polish studies that contribute to the body of urban morphological work.

There were two invited guests, both members of the Council of the International Seminar on Urban

Form: I. Samuels of the University of Birmingham and M. Maretto of the Università degli Studi di Parma. Samuels spoke on ‘Anglophone urban morphology: from explanation to prescription’. He discussed the role of urban morphology both in the description of urban structure and in design decisions and planning. Maretto presented a paper on ‘Saverio Muratori and the Italian school of urban morphology: a legacy in urban design’ in which he outlined the contributions of Muratori in the fields of architecture, urban design and planning. In a paper on ‘Reading the Alnwick plan’, A. A. Kantarek presented the main elements of the Conzenian approach.

Polish contributions to the field of urban morphology were presented by J. Wesolowski, and M. Hanzl in ‘Urban morphology as a key element of the curriculum in the Division of Urban Structures, Institute of Architecture and Town Planning, Łódź University of Technology’. They discussed urban morphology in the education of architects. The wider achievements of Polish studies of urban form were presented by A. A. Kantarek in ‘The Polish network of urban morphology’. K. Wielgus described a morphological approach to landscape in ‘Janusz Bogdanowski’s method of landscape units: examples of its recent application’.

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## First Symposium of the Turkish Network of Urban Morphology, Mersin, Turkey, 22–23 October 2015

Following from a Foundation Workshop in April 2014, this first symposium of the Turkish Network of Urban Morphology (TNUM) was hosted by the Centre for Mediterranean Urban Studies at Mersin University. Attracting 56 participants from 19 universities, 35 papers were presented. The topics addressed included methods and techniques in urban morphology; planning, architecture, design and their relation to urban form; urban growth and fringe belts; the history of urban form; morphological agencies; public space; typomorphology; and space syntax.

In the first plenary session, Tolga Ünlü and Yener Baş (Mersin University) explored the transformation of the city of Mersin since the early-twentieth century. Based on a historico-geographical approach and morphogenetic method, first they revealed the urban development pattern at a macro scale through an investigation of fringe-belt formation and modification processes. Then they considered development cycles and ‘morphogenetic types’ in a detailed exploration of the transformation of plot and building patterns. The subsequent plenary session comprised two papers on different approaches to the study of urban form. Ayşe Sema Kubat (Istanbul Technical University) discussed the use of space syntax as a method for investigating the relationship between spatial organization and social structures, focusing on open spaces in a range of Turkish cities. Cana Bilsel (Middle East Technical University) considered the contribution of urban morphological research within urban historical studies. Taking an international perspective, she was mainly concerned with developing a methodological framework for urban historical studies through explorations into the shaping of urban space.

The first day concluded with a special session on different approaches and methods in the study of urban form. Spatial-analytical, configurational and historico-geographical approaches were

considered, including their implementation in different contexts. A ‘parametric’ morphological method was discussed as a tool to link morphological research with planning and urban design practices.

The second day contained sessions on ‘Morphological processes within historical city centres’; ‘History of urban form’; ‘Urban growth and fringe belts’; ‘Space syntax’; ‘Morphological agencies’; and ‘Morphological research and planning and design practice’.

This first symposium of TNUM revealed substantial research potential for the study of urban form in different disciplines (notably planning, architecture and geography) and accommodating different approaches and methods. In the concluding session, participants discussed the structure of TNUM and possible collaborations of researchers both within TNUM and with other regional networks.

The Secretariat of TNUM will be based in the Centre for Mediterranean Urban Studies at Mersin University. The next symposium will take place in 2017 in Istanbul organized by Istanbul Technical University. The symposium in 2019 will be in Ankara organized by Middle East Technical University.

It has been agreed to develop a commonly accepted vocabulary of urban morphology in the Turkish language, and to give attention at an early stage to the place of urban morphology in education. Although the participants at the symposium were mostly from the disciplines of planning and architecture, it is anticipated that at the next symposium there will be greater representation of other disciplines, notably geography, history and archaeology.

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## Meeting of the Council of ISUF

The next meeting of the Council of ISUF will take place immediately preceding the Conference of ISUF to be held in Nanjing, China, 8 to 10 July 2016. Any matters that members of ISUF wish to bring to the attention of the Secretary-General of

ISUF, Professor Kai Gu, should be communicated to him at the School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: k.gu@auckland.ac.nz) by 1 June 2016.