

Completing the foundations

Having staged its first major conference in the hearthland of the Industrial Revolution, ISUF chose as the venue of its second major conference the birthplace of the Renaissance. Within Europe, one could scarcely find more contrasting cities than Birmingham and Florence. In moving from one to the other, ISUF was doing much more than sharpening for us the contrast between industrial city and Renaissance city. Whereas Birmingham is predominantly a city of single-family houses and private gardens, a city known for its garden suburbs, Florence is above all a city of palaces and tenements. This difference of physical form was paralleled by a shift in responsibility for the organization of the conference. Now it was the turn of the architects of the University of Florence to provide the setting for our deliberations.

Differences of physical environment and organizational style in Florence were accompanied, very appropriately, by some shift in emphasis towards the work of Italian architectural morphologists. And there was an opportunity to explore in the field some of the ideas developed by Italians working in the Caniggian tradition, not least concerning the typological process, in the very city in which some of those ideas had been developed. It afforded an exceptional chance to compare this tradition, its intellectual milieu, objects of study and concepts with those that had received greater prominence in Birmingham.

One matter that arises out of this comparison, and which is raised elsewhere in this issue, concerns the applicability of the two traditions that have hitherto received greatest prominence in the affairs of ISUF - the Caniggian and the Conzenian - to understanding the types of built environment that have come into existence in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Despite their differences, both traditions are rooted in, and developed their intellectual foundations in, traditional European cities. Their principal ideas relate to layouts in which the street provides both the dominant functional and the main formal framework of the city: it combines the role of thoroughfare and frontage, communication channel and façade. Most European townscapes are largely made up of streetscapes in which the alignments of plots and buildings in relation to street frontages are critical. The plot head and the building façade are no less important in appreciation of the city than faces are in human intercourse. Some of these basic relationships are largely preserved, even accentuated, in the industrial city. In certain other traditional cultures different physical arrangements prevail, but among some of these cultures the work of settlement morphologists has scarcely begun. However, challenges to traditional frameworks for viewing and conceptualizing cities have been arising over several decades within the Western world as Levy describes in this issue (pp. 79-85). For example, motorways, point-block buildings, elevated walkways, shopping malls, podiums, out-of-town supermarkets and, by no means least, the reduced use of the plot as a basic structuring unit, have increased the areas within which the morphologist's traditional structuring framework of streets, plots and buildings is less applicable. Such developments were evidently in Scheer's mind (this issue, pp. 86-9) when she raised the question as to whether methods born of the traditional European city, whether those of architects or geographers, are transferable to other times and places.

Such questions are coming into sharper focus as urban morphologists of different persuasions are inter-mixing as never before. An underlying obstacle that the resolution of these questions faces is the poor mutual understanding of different schools of thought. Even *within* individual 'schools' there is a need for systematic review and reassessment of basic concepts in the light of developments in other fields and disciplines, not least in philosophy. If left to the initiative of individuals, such work is likely to be piecemeal and unco-ordinated. For this reason, the Council of ISUF is setting up several commissions, each consisting of a small number of persons with specialist expertise, to investigate key themes. Two commissions were ratified by the Council at its second meeting in Florence: one on the role of history in the study of urban form, and the other on theory and methodology. Following that meeting two further commissions were proposed: on GIS and cartography, and on legislation and urban form. Preliminary reports by each commission will be presented to, and discussed by, the Council at its meetings in Groningen, Netherlands in July 2000. As ISUF's organizational structures take shape, so energy is, quite rightly, being channelled into the tough intellectual tasks for which those structures were conceived. If Birmingham and Florence have provided the foundations for our endeavours, then perhaps Cincinnati, the venue of ISUF's third major conference, in 2001, can begin to demonstrate that those foundations were both justified and fit for purpose.

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