

## From Como to Alnwick: in pursuit of Caniggia and Conzen

Over the last 2 years the work of Gianfranco Caniggia has been the subject of heightened interest. In 2002, a major seminar on his work was held, most appropriately, in the city of Como<sup>1</sup> which, 40 years ago, was the subject of his first major contribution to knowledge.<sup>2</sup> It was followed this year by the Tenth International Seminar on Urban Form in Trani, in the Apulian region of southern Italy, where the interest in the ideas of Caniggia was clearly evident, albeit alongside many other topics. Two recent books have widened and focused the interest, one a translation into English of a book first published in 1979<sup>3</sup> and the other based on the seminar in Como.<sup>4</sup> And, recently there have been several papers in this journal that have discussed Caniggia's work.<sup>5</sup>

Next year will provide an opportunity to set Caniggia's contribution within a wider comparative context, both international and interdisciplinary. The principal locale of ISUF's deliberations will shift from Italy to the United Kingdom. The country of birth and the urban landscapes that were Caniggia's seminary will be succeeded, in ISUF's peregrinations, by the adopted home and more northerly urban scene that became the laboratory of M.R.G. Conzen. In moving from the scene of one path-breaking study, the city of Como, to that of another, the north-British market town of Alnwick, which Conzen placed so firmly on the map of knowledge, one challenge in particular needs to be met: to bring into sharper focus some of the intriguing similarities, as well as a few of the contrasts, between the remarkable men who immortalized these places in the annals of urban morphology.<sup>6</sup>

### *Comparing Caniggia and Conzen*

At first sight it might seem improbable that these two scholars would have much in common. Their birth dates (1907 in the case of Conzen; 1933 in the case of Caniggia) were a generation apart. They worked in different disciplines Caniggia was an archi-tect and Conzen a geographer. They worked in different places Caniggia largely in Italy; Conzen largely in Germany and England. They published in different languages Caniggia almost entirely in Italian; Conzen largely in English. They never met. Apparently Caniggia was unaware of Conzen's work, and Conzen became aware of Caniggia's only very late in life. The works they cite are almost entirely different. They inhabited different worlds as far as both personal and impersonal contacts were concerned.

However, it would be wrong to assume that these men were dissimilar in their intellectual approaches and philosophical convictions. In fact these two scholars, each outstanding in his field, arrived independently at similar views about a number of aspects of the world in general and settlements in particular. These shared views, and their basis, require our attention.

### *Thinking about landscape change*

Perhaps the single most important feature that Caniggia and Conzen have in common is the stress they place on historical continuity. There is no shortage of examples of the importance that Caniggia attaches to what Conzen calls a morphogenetic approach.

'The positioning of a building in an urban nucleus not only depends on the building date of the manmade construction that still exists, but largely derives most of its characteristics from the first building date from which it inherits its position and the size of the built lot'.<sup>7</sup> The import of this is clear: the interest is in the genesis of form. The underpinning philosophies also have common features. As Gian Luigi Maffei expresses the Caniggian view, 'it is a question of extracting the laws of behaviour, formation and mutation of manmade structuring on various scales'.<sup>8</sup> Conzen would not have expressed it quite in those terms for example, he would have spoken of 'principles' rather than 'laws',<sup>9</sup> making an important distinction between those two words but the notion of searching for concepts about how places change in their physical configuration would have been very congenial to him.

How things change is central to both philosophies. And some of the concepts employed for understanding change are also similar. Both attach significance to booms and slumps in development and the differences between the forms created in booms and slumps. Both consider the spatial aspects of cycles. Both emphasize that every cycle differs because it is conditioned by previous cycles. However, there are differences between Caniggia and Conzen that are inseparable from their differences of purpose. Conzen's priority is to reconstruct the historico-geographical development of the city: detailed plans of actual field-mapped configurations and distributions are of the essence.

Caniggia is trying to enunciate principles whereby cities can be transformed: his formulations tend to be more abstract.

The mutual concern with how things change begs the question 'what things?'. The answer in both cases is the ordinary observable objects of which towns and cities are made. This may seem unexceptionable to followers of Caniggia and Conzen, but to most anglophone architectural historians that would be a major departure from their main concern, which is polite or high architecture, not ordinary buildings. In contrast, Caniggia and Maffei state: 'cities are not conditioned by the few works taken to be 'architecture' but by the countless works bordering on anonymity in building'.<sup>10</sup> This is largely Conzen's view too.

### *The place of geography*

A striking feature of Caniggia's scholarship is how geographical it is - more geographical than that of some geographers! And there is more to it than the use of numerous maps and plans. Caniggia and Maffei's book *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* is structured in terms of geographical scale: it starts at the scale of the building and works up through aggregations of buildings to entire settlements as entities, and finally to relationships between settlements, especially the routeways linking settlements. But the way in which this is done is distinctive, and it is not clear as yet what borrowing, direct or indirect, there may have been from geography.

The geographical quality in Caniggia's work stands in contrast to that in the work of his contemporary Aldo Rossi. Rossi's book *The architecture of the city*<sup>11</sup> draws on the work of many geographers French, American, German and British. Some get a passing reference; some are discussed at length. Conzen does not get a mention. Rossi also draws on the work of urbanists from many other disciplines. But despite all its references to geographers, *The architecture of the city* is less geographical in its contents than Caniggia and Maffei's *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building*. In contrast geography is inherent in Caniggia's theoretical framework, as it was in Saverio Muratori's.<sup>12</sup> At the seminar about the Caniggian school that was held in Florence in 1997,<sup>13</sup> before the ISUF conference in Birmingham, the same geographical structuring of ideas was evident. And it is a coherent, integrated framework. Again, if comparisons are drawn with the views that Rossi propounds in *The architecture of the city*, Rossi's book is more a *composition* based on fragments from many authors it is more a piece of eclecticism than a theory structured *ab initio*.

### *Conceptualizing space and process*

Of course, the geographical scale for which the Caniggian school is best known is that of the building, and in particular the historical development of building types. Conzen gives little or no attention to the historical development of building types. But he is greatly concerned with changing geographical configurations at all scales, ranging from the individual building and plot to the city as a whole. As far as the physical growth of cities is concerned, he makes an important distinction between residential accretion and fringe-belt development.<sup>14</sup> Within residential accretions he distinguishes townscape units areas having unity derived from their physical form and land use. Caniggia and Maffei place greater stress on modules what geographers sometimes refer to as nodal regions or functional regions areas unified by the functional linkages within them.<sup>15</sup> Indeed Caniggia and Maffei recognize hierarchies of modules in a manner that may for some be reminiscent of geographers' central-place theory.

The importance that Caniggia and Maffei attribute to functional linkages in recognizing modules and hierarchies of modules gives rise to a different type of regionalization from that produced by Conzen. Conzen's townscape units or morphological regions are based on units of form not functional linkages. His spatial units are what geographers call formal regions.<sup>16</sup> They are based on the physical characteristics of ground plan, buildings and land use, and on the genesis of these form complexes. The conformations of form complexes, and how they have arisen, are critical. A formal region recognized on this basis may or may not correspond to a nodal region. This difference between Caniggian units and Conzenian ones needs exploring, as do the implications for planning.

One other difference should not be overlooked. Caniggia borrows freely from biology: the typological process is analogous to a biological process. Conzen, in contrast, emphasizes the *distinction* between biotic causality and social causality,<sup>17</sup> and relatively few of his terms have biological parallels. He uses the word 'evolution', for example, and cognate words, but not in a biological sense. And he is not a typologist, at least not in the typological process sense,

as Nicola Marzot pointed out several years ago.<sup>18</sup> Indeed Conzen's concept of the morpho-logical period would repay further explor-ation with the typological process in mind.

### *Conceptual developments and history*

Looking at the challenges ahead, there is a great deal of common ground between Caniggia and Conzen that needs exploring further. It is remarkable that the schools of thought to which each gave rise for so long remained almost entirely separate. Those schools are somewhat different in character. Of the two, the Caniggian school is more explicitly acknowledged by its members. But in both cases there is evident momentum for developing further a remarkable body of ideas. Some of the more important develop-ments are at the conjunctions of those two bodies of ideas the relationship between the typological process and the morphological period is a striking example. And there are challenges here for historians of urban morphology too. For not irrelevant to these conceptual developments is the historical task of explaining how the bodies of ideas were generated. It would be interesting to trace the influences on Caniggia and Conzen to see, if one went back far enough, what common antecedents could be found. In looking both backwards and forwards there are exciting prospects.

### Notes

1. Samuels, I. (2002) 'The Caniggia Seminar, Cernobbio, Como, Italy, 5-6 July 2002', *Urban Morphology* 6, 90-3.
2. Caniggia, G. (1963) *Letture di una città: Como* (Centro Studi di Storia Urbanistica, Roma).
3. Caniggia, G. and Maffei, G.L. (2001) *Architectural composition and building typology: interpreting basic building* (Aliena, Firenze).
4. D'Amato Guerrieri, C. and Strappa, G. (eds) (2003) *Gianfranco Caniggia: dalla lettura di Como all'interpretazione tipologia della città* (Mario Adda, Bari).
5. For example, Cataldi, G., Maffei, G.L. and Vaccaro, P. (2002) 'Saverio Muratori and the Italian school of planning typology', *Urban Morphology* 6, 3-14; Cataldi, G. (2003) 'From Muratori to Caniggia; the origins and development of the Italian school of design typology', *Urban Morphology* 7, 19-34.
6. This editorial comment draws heavily on Whitehand, J.W.R. (2003) 'Gianfranco Caniggia and M.R.G. Conzen: remarkable parallels', in D'Amato Guerrieri and Strappa, *op. cit.* (note 4) 109-14. For a major investigation of the ideas and methods of Caniggia and Conzen, see Kropf, K.S. (1993) 'An enquiry into the definition of built form in urban morphology', unpub-. lished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham.
7. Caniggia and Maffei, *op. cit.* (note 3) 239.
8. Maffei, G.L. (2001) 'Foreword', in Caniggia and Maffei, *op. cit.* (note 3) 11.
9. Conzen, M.R.G. (1970) *The purpose and contents of geography* University of Newcastle upon Tyne Department of Geography Seminar Paper 14 (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne).
10. Caniggia and Maffei, *op. cit.* (note 3) 33.
11. Rossi, A. (1982) *The architecture of the city* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.).
12. Cataldi, *op. cit.* (note 5) 26.
13. Cataldi, G., Maffei, G.L. and Vaccaro, P. (1997) *Architecture and context: scientific interpretation and planning practice* video recording (Servizio Audiovisivo, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze).
14. Conzen, M.R.G. (1960) *Alnwick, North-umberland: a study in town-plan analysis* Institute of British Geographers Publication 27 (George Philip, London).
15. Hartshorne, R. (1960) *Perspective on the nature of geography* (John Murray, London) 134-45.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Conzen (1970) *op. cit.* (note 9).
18. Marzot, N. (1998) 'The role of history in Conzen's and Caniggia's approaches to urban morphology', *Urban Morphology* 2, 54-5.

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