
Twenty-Seventh International Seminar on Urban Form, Salt Lake City/online, 2020

The twenty-seventh International Seminar on Urban Form conference took place online in the Pandemic Year of 2020. Our international scholarly community was scheduled initially to return to the US for the first time since 2001, but it was not to be. Instead, we employed the relatively new meeting technology of Zoom, and gave up the in-person relationships and on-site tours that have meant so much to the development of scholars in this field. Ironically, the theme – ‘Cities in the twenty-first century’ – came roaring to life rather more tangibly than we could have expected, as we were driven to smart technology, to globalism, to reductions in emission-intensive travel, and to new forms of social engagement.

What did we learn? First, the virtual conference allowed people to participate who could never have afforded the cost to travel and register for the conference. More than 250 people registered and attended from 36 countries, an unusually diverse and international mix, with all but seven countries (China, United States, Brazil, Canada, Italy, the UK, and Turkey) having less than ten participants. Such a broad international distribution would not be possible in real life. Over half of the presenters were students.

Secondly, our first-ever virtual conference was a logistical and coordination nightmare: software to organize the program, papers and registrants, software to run the sessions, software to catalogue and store the recordings, software to communicate with organizers, software to keep track of moderators and hosts, and software to create a portal where all these could be indexed and found. Trying to make sure that no-one had to present their paper at 4 am (4:00) meant that all the sessions had to be cross-referenced for time zone. The technology also demanded a new skill – the traditional session moderator/chair was joined by a ‘Host’, one of a group of young volunteer morphology scholars, recruited from around the world, who met and trained prior to the conference.

Thirdly, the conference itself was a mixed bag of virtual pros and cons: the 60 sessions were held over 24 hours, enabling people to attend from different time zones, but making it impossible to attend more than a handful of them. Informal gatherings, meals and parties were missed, but more than 100 hours of sessions were recorded and are still available to conference registrants. A new

format, the ‘lobby session’, offered lively panel discussions, but we had no restaurants and bars to continue them informally.

Finally, after an invigorating session online, with one click it all disappeared and you were home alone. Virtual meetings cost less, enable more global participation, and are easier to attend but they do not allow you to make informal connections, or new friends. Not being *in situ* means that you cannot concentrate your focus: you may still have to teach or pick up the kids or make dinner. Meeting in real time virtually across the entire earth was thrilling and challenging, but also discouraging and sad.

This raises the question of how the success of a conference is to be measured. In the number of attendees? The new members to ISUF who are recruited? The quality of the paper presentations and the published Proceedings? The connections established? The ideas explored and emergent? Because of the nature of our fields, do we also have to add the hands-on ability to visit and learn about new environments?

As morphologists, we all love cities, but we are reminded by our research that cities are not just the people, just as conferences cannot be measured by the little Zoom boxes of virtual images. Cities are also buildings, plans, streets, landscape and other forms that bind us to those who came before, as they also bind us to each other. We recognize and honour the similarities and patterns that magically reoccur across the globe, creating a stronger sense of universal human conditions. We miss the smells and sights and excitement of our visit and, I can assure you, your hosts very much miss not being able to bring it to you.

As for the conference, we enjoyed almost 160 papers, many of which were case studies applying well-known theoretical ideas in a huge variety of contexts. Other papers challenged our methods, especially those that introduced computational models to explain morphological variance and patterns. Some new theories were proposed but many old ones were elaborated. *Proceedings of the XXVII ISUF Conference* will be available in the digital collections at the Marriott Library at the University of Utah and will be catalogued at World Cat.Org.

I wish to acknowledge the critical encouragement of the ISUF Executive Committee and to

congratulate my intrepid assistant, Dr Pratiti Tagore, who was awarded her PhD about one month after the conference.

As I write this, our pathetic 2020 is dragging to its finale, and our hopes are soaring for a new year, where we can perhaps hear the bagpipes in person and revel in the concrete evidence of our historic urban heritage. See you in Glasgow!

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Owing to the unusual nature of the conference, as Editor I have collated views from several conference participants to add to the conference organiser's perspective. My thanks to those who contributed.

'I think the Lobby sessions were a means to try to make up for the lack of a real physical 'lobby' as a setting for informal interaction. And they worked splendidly. Short presentations provided the springboards for lots of good conversation and debate – all of it was stimulating and helpful. Many people at the sessions were engaged and had something to contribute. We should figure out a way to have such informal discussions even when we have 'live' conferences again – where the usual balance between 75% or 80% formal presentation

and 20% or 25% questions and discussion is reversed, favouring informal but focused discussion' (Howard Davis).

'The sessions I had the opportunity to attend have allowed me contact with new research concerning the study of urban form, from different parts of the globe (mostly from Asia, Europe, and Latin America). Concerns towards the pertinence of the study of change of the urban form related to various domains (such as political, social, economic, infrastructures, among others) emerged as a common thematic interface, which promptly promoted comparative analysis discussions in those sessions, which was very fruitful and positive' (Teresa Marat-Mendes).

'This was an exciting and very informative event. I am grateful for Professor Brenda Scheer's idea to have PhD students involved in hosting of the sessions. Now my students promote urban morphology among their peers, and it becomes quite a popular topic in our university. I missed the direct discussions (not to mention beer, etc), and I must admit that participation in many online events was exhausting. Nevertheless, still worth it. Thank you very much for this opportunity to visit SLC virtually (Małgorzata Hanzl).

Małgorzata Hanzl has also created an urban morphology YouTube channel, where some conference material can be viewed: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsxM_fHz2jjFdyxptUOyH8w
