

Eighteenth International Seminar on Urban Form, Montréal, Canada, 26-29 August 2011



Figure 1. The reception in the Canadian Centre for Architecture (photograph by Faiz Imam).

ISUF 2011 was only the second ISUF conference to be held in North America. With the theme ‘Urban morphology and the post-carbon city’, it was held at Concordia University, on the Sir George Williams Campus, located in downtown Montréal in the vibrant Rue Sainte-Catherine. The Canadian organizers of the conference, led by Pierre Gauthier (Concordia University) and Jason Gilliland (University of Western Ontario), are to be congratulated on their organization of this remarkable and very productive event.

Like the last ISUF conference in North America (in Cincinnati in 2001), this one in Montréal was a huge success. There were 217 presentations and more than 250 participants. It is to be hoped that the strong Canadian participation in ISUF 2011 will be followed by increasing Canadian participation in ISUF more generally in the coming years, as occurred in the case of Brazilian participation after the Ouro Preto conference in 2007.

The truly international dimension of ISUF was once again evident, with participants coming from five continents. As expected the Americas (50 per cent) and Europe (28 per cent) were the most represented parts of the world. Unfortunately, African participation was small (2 per cent).

Nevertheless, the participation of the Algerian delegation, ‘representing’ the African Continent, should be highlighted. Organizers of future conferences should clearly affirm the promotion of African participation as a key challenge. A closer look at the top ten countries by the origin of those presenting papers reveals that the three most represented countries were all in the Americas (Canada, Brazil and the United States) followed in descending order by the United Kingdom, France, China, Portugal, Japan, Australia, and Sweden.

Besides providing the stage for very productive urban morphological debate, this conference offered participants the opportunity – enhanced by the field trips on the second day – to discover a fascinating city. The history of Montréal started with a small mission colony of about 50 settlers in 1642, later becoming an active commercial centre, and then an important metropolis. Industrialization and the development of the service sector were crucial for that development process. The exceptional conditions of the site (particularly Mount Royal and its surrounding forests, the St. Lawrence River, and the Lachine rapids) were decisive in the establishment of the first settlements. Throughout the years these initial



Figure 2. The gala dinner in the Marché Bonsecours (photograph by Faiz Imam).

urban forms expanded in the form of a powerful urban grid, parallel to the river. More recently there were major changes in the city centre, including the construction of several skyscrapers.

After the official opening of the conference, the paper sessions began with a keynote address by Jeremy Whitehand (University of Birmingham). Drawing especially on articles and editorials that he had published in *Urban Morphology* over recent years, he gave us a remarkable paper, where *the* key issues of – and *the* challenges for – urban morphology, as a field of knowledge in the contemporary world, were identified and debated. These issues were: the multidisciplinary of urban morphology; the problem of ‘anglophone squint’; Euro-American ‘myopia’; the tension between the ‘particular’ and the ‘general’; the need for comparative studies; the need for integrated approaches; the relationship between research and practice; urban morphological classics; and finally, cross-disciplinary relationships.

Over the 4 days of the conference eight broad ‘streams’ were pursued: (1) advances in theory and methods; (2) temporality (continuity and change); (3) new regional spatial dynamics; (4) form, society and technology; (5) heritage and form; (6) topical explorations; (7) form, sustainability and climatic change; and finally, (8) urban morphology, planning and urban design. Streams 7 and 8 contained the largest number of presentations. This seems to confirm that the relationships between urban morphology and both urban planning and other fields of knowledge concerning the city and

the built environment are major issues under discussion by urban morphologists – see also Oliveira (2011). At the interface between urban morphology, sustainability and climatic-change studies, explored in Stream 7, it is important to highlight the work that is being developed in the National University of Singapore, Nanjing University, and the University of Western Ontario. However, Stream 3, which focused on new spatial dynamics at the regional scale (including issues such as the dispersed city and the fragmented city) attracted less than 10 papers – a reminder, perhaps, of the need for ISUF to address all the different scales in morphological theory, research and practice.

As always, rich morphological debates were not confined to the paper sessions. Many fruitful discussions took place during the social events of the conference: the coffee breaks and lunch breaks, the reception in the Canadian Centre for Architecture (Figure 1), and the gala dinner in the remarkable building of Marché Bonsecours (Figure 2).

The conference was concluded with a plenary presentation by Michael Conzen (University of Chicago) on the future of ISUF and, indeed, of urban morphology as a field of knowledge. Some of the themes that had been introduced by Jeremy Whitehand in the first day of the conference, and debated in different parallel sessions, were revisited. The different types of study of urban form and the need for comparative analysis, such as recently proposed by Karl Kropf (2009), were



Figure 3. The historical core of Quebec City (middle ground) and its inner fringe belt (foreground) (photograph by Susan Whitehand).

given particular attention. A wider framework of analysis, encompassing not only different approaches but also different disciplines, was proposed.

Before returning to their countries of origin some participants took part in one of two excursions. The first took participants to Quebec City (Figure 3), the capital of the province of Quebec, founded in the seventeenth century. The second excursion was to Toronto, founded in the late-eighteenth century, and now the largest city in Canada. The remaining participants departed with the satisfaction of being part of the large ISUF family and with renewed enthusiasm for another year of morphological research. After the attractive invitation of Nicola Marzot (Technische Universiteit Delft) at the end of the conference, a

trip to Delft for ISUF 2012 should already be on the agenda of many participants.

References

- Kropf, K. (2009) 'Aspects of urban form', *Urban Morphology* 13, 105-20.
 Oliveira, V. (2011) 'Our common future in urban morphology', *Urban Morphology* 15, 77-9.

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