

Nineteenth International Seminar on Urban Form, Delft, The Netherlands, 16-19 October 2012

The School of Architecture and the Built Environment on the campus of Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) in The Netherlands provided the setting for ISUF 2012. Pre-conference strolls around the scenic medieval city of Delft revealed a distinct regional morphology defined by a network of canals and drawbridges. Portions of the city wall and east gate, 'Ossport', remain as some of the earliest urban elements among predominantly three-storey medieval layers. The cityscape is punctuated by cathedral spires. A large central market square contains Delft's Renaissance style City Hall, 'Stadus', and the 'Nieuwe Kerk' (new cathedral), completed in the late-fifteenth century. A few quarters of the city that were destroyed either in a seventeenth-century gunpowder explosion or during the Second World War have been significantly reconstructed during the post-war period. This newcomer to The Netherlands was impressed upon arrival at the railway station (as was ISUF President Michael Conzen), by prolific vertical racks of bicycles, Delft's preferred mode of transportation.

TU Delft's School of Architecture and the European Association of Architectural Education (EAAE) collaborated with ISUF to sponsor the conference, which addressed the overarching theme of 'New urban configurations'. Papers were solicited under the conference sub-themes of 'Innovation in building typology', 'Infrastructure and the city', 'Complex urban projects', 'Green spaces: the city and the territory', and, speaking most directly to the geographical context of the conference, 'Delta urbanism: living with water in the urban deltas'. Departing from ISUF conference tradition, submissions concerning morphological research were rejected if they did not directly subscribe to one of the themes. Presumably the organizers decided not to offer an open category in order to accommodate both the heavy subscription to conference sub-themes and an unusually full schedule of plenary speakers.

In tandem with the conference, the School of Architecture hosted an exhibition entitled 'Renewal of urban renewal', featuring significant urban design interventions in the cities of Leiden, The Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Exhibited works in the school's forum space addressed the topics of industrial inheritance, neighbourhood economy, traffic infrastructure and green infrastructure. The works also served as the focus

for panel presentations by design professionals and government planning officials during the entirety of the first afternoon of the conference. Invited plenary speakers Henk Engel, Julian Lewis, Paolo Fusi, Paul Veremeulen and Sotira Kornaopoulou offered perspectives concerning the renewal of urban renewal and urban design as well as processes for contemporary urban intervention. The School's unique 'forum' space, as retrofitted within the late-nineteenth-century building envelope, provided the context for the exhibition's official opening as well as several conference box lunches and evening receptions (Figure 1).

The ISUF portion of the conference opened with a symposium on the international heritage, scholarship, and research methodologies of Saverio Muratori (Figure 2). Speakers Nicola Marzot, Sylvain Malfroy, Ivor Samuels, and Pier Giorgio Gerosa contributed perspectives on Muratori's contributions to urban morphology as well as continuing concerns about the relative obscurity of his work outside of Italy. A common thread throughout the symposium presentations was the need for more direct access to Muratori's thoughts via a common language – whether metaphysical or literal in the form of more effective publications in English and other languages. Suggested strategies included further biographical research, systematic review of archival manuscripts and drawings, and critical translation. A concluding roundtable led by Giancarlo Cataldi, reflected on the need to transfer useful tools that can be derived from Muratori's work from the academy directly to contemporary practice in design and planning fields. Panelists agreed that in terms of what would be best for the city, Muratori's focus on 'collective intentionality' and interpretation of inherited fabric, in lieu of the individual designers' quest for novelty, would probably support a richer platform for collaborative, interdisciplinary research and contemporary urban practice. It would seem that the bulk of this year's conference participants, many of whom were design and planning practitioners and educators, could benefit from more direct and relevant access to Muratori's works. The challenge, as presented by Ivor Samuels, is to 'find avenues, above individual schools of thought, to bridge complexity and multiple disciplines, in order to disseminate morphology into practice'. In his keynote address, Jean Castex highlighted Muratori's reverence to



Figure 1. A social gathering in the forum space.



Figure 2. The panel session on the work of Saverio Muratori.

‘the city as the only model’ in his own design and planning of new interventions and architectural typologies. Such reverent practices appear to be lacking in most contemporary grand gesture

approaches to urban design intervention, including some of the case study projects presented at the conference.

Of potentially equal importance to the current

generation of scholarship and practice in the design fields is the broadened effort to disseminate the seminal works of M.R.G. Conzen and to interpret their relevance for contemporary practice. Among other strategies, translations of his works are needed to extend their influence. Gian Luigi Maffei, Giuseppe Strappa and Giancarlo Cataldi discussed their recently released translation into Italian of *Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis*. Their keynote panel reflected on the value of Conzen's work to 'analytical processes as applied to existing settings', as well as his contributions to 'understanding formative processes in the town plan'.

In his keynote address entitled 'cross-cultural urban morphology', Michael Conzen highlighted the value of interpreting and comparing 'plan units' as shaped by significantly different cultures throughout the world. Conzen posited that, as the Third World continues to undergo rapid urbanization, this new topic of cross comparison in morphological research is currently underserved. He treated us to the potentially rich forum that such collaborative research can offer by sharing initial findings from his own comparative research on Chinese cities and Italian cities in collaboration with ISUF Secretary-General Kai Gu. An interesting side note is that both scholars were about to head for Como, Italy, for a post-conference research trip. Their agenda included completion of field documentation activities, highlighting the continuing value of place-based research using Conzenian methodologies.

A number of TU Delft members presented their research and practice from varying disciplinary perspectives concerning topics as diverse as the 'second urban revolution', 'metabolic flows within urban configurations', 'complexity theory', 'the contemporary role of design in complex urban projects', and 'design challenges of rising sea levels facing delta regions'. Presenters on these topics included Juval Portugali, Dirk Sijmons, Kees Kahn and Han Meyer.

Parallel paper sessions subscribing to each conference sub-theme were sandwiched between keynote presentations throughout Days 2 and 3 of the conference. Given the unusual number of plenary speakers, time was compressed for paper sessions, allowing each presenter only 10 minutes. It was obviously impossible to attend all concurrent sessions or to provide a comprehensive review of them. Under the theme of 'Complex urban projects', several papers addressed strategies to regenerate public space in contexts as diverse as Lisbon, Barcelona, and Queensland. Many papers

offered unique frameworks and processes for analysing urban contexts using state-of-the-art technological tools for data acquisition and analysis. They demonstrated that applications of new computer technologies such as remote sensing for morphological research projects can enhance capacity to interpret an expanded areal extent. In contexts in which rapid urbanization and associated geographical expansion are being experienced, this becomes essential. In terms of the research process, emphasis in a majority of works presented was placed on novelty. Efforts to build on long-standing precedents for morphological analysis were lacking. Notable exceptions included a study on 'Rehabitat project in Barcelona' and a comparative study of greater Miami and Queensland. The paper sessions, which largely featured young scholars, left several established morphological researchers questioning whether the value of traditional analytical methods is being adequately communicated to the next generation.

Papers on the theme 'Green spaces: the city and the territory', featured collaborative morphological studies by Brazilian researchers of urban parks in Belo Horizonte and other Brazilian cities using Conzenian methods. Other notable papers addressed conversion of vacated land in shrinking cities, such as Detroit, and associated reuse for urban agriculture and incorporation of solar technology in urban environments.

In a late change to the programme a session was added on the art of teaching urban morphology. Peter Larkham discussed the paucity of publications about morphological pedagogy, the Eurocentric nature of those case studies currently available for use as teaching resources, and the absence of teaching as an ISUF conference focus since 2003 in Trani. Larkham proposed several strategies to improve the situation: for example, those teaching courses in urban morphology could post syllabi on ISUF's website, and a dialogue group could be formed to prepare case studies and other teaching materials that are relevant across multiple cultures and disciplines. In a related presentation, Terry Slater shared his use of a series of course related walking tours to introduce beginning college students to the history and physical elements of their surrounding built environment.

During the closing session, questions were raised for further contemplation about the relative value of partnering with other scholarly organizations for future ISUF meetings and specifically EAEE. In terms of urban morphology, the organizational liaisons between ISUF 2012 and the EAEE



Figure 3. The Amsterdam excursion in progress.

afforded a potentially rich forum for dialogue surrounding shared interests in the physical dimensions and characteristics of urban environments and developments. ISUF membership aspires to promote the value that urban morphology holds for urban practitioners. Such a liaison has the potential to enhance capacity for systematic interpretation of urban environments prior to design and planning of new urban interventions. Disappointingly, much of the conference dialogue drifted away from a focus on urban morphology and more directly into the realms of urban design and practice. Consequently, the new collaboration experienced some mismatched expectations. Regular ISUF participants suggested the need for stronger guidelines for abstract solicitation and submission to ensure that papers more directly address urban morphology. This participant would argue that while some clarity of purpose and focus of ISUF's mission was lost in translation, the exposure that new participants from the disciplines and practices of architecture and urban design

received to key streams of morphological thought was potentially worth the compromise ... this one time.

Two post-conference excursions explored the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. I joined the Amsterdam group led by Meta Berghauser Pont, along with the Samuels, Gu, Conzen and the Whitehands, among others (Figure 3). We embarked on a 6 km walking tour of large urban projects in the form of new and adapted housing developments along the canal front. From strategic vista points we could observe shifts in scale and use along the working canal. We then circled back through largely medieval neighbourhoods towards the railway station and on to our destinations across the globe.

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