
Twentieth International Seminar on Urban Form, Brisbane, Australia, 17-20 July 2013



Figure 1. Michael Conzen and Giancarlo Cataldi are introduced by Paul Sanders at the plenary session on traditions, techniques and trends in urban morphology.

For its 20th annual gathering, ISUF made its first incursion into Oceania. ISUF 2013 was held at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. The participants convened on the QUT campus, located next to the Brisbane River and the city's luxurious botanical garden, on the edge of the business and administrative district. The flawless organization and the quality of the setting contributed greatly to the success of a conference attended by over 100 participants and marked by a collegial atmosphere. In addition to a guided tour of Brisbane, many attendees seized the opportunity to attend pre-conference tours in Auckland, New Zealand with Kai Gu (University of Auckland) as well as post-conference tours in Melbourne with Rosemary Kennedy (QUT) and in Sydney with Marco Pompili (University of New South Wales). ISUF participants also had the possibility to attend the one-day pre-conference 'City-making superforum', organized with the Urban Design Alliance (UDAL) and devoted to recent urban design and city-making practices in

Queensland.

With the theme 'Urban form at the edge', the conference programme included 25 paper sessions and five interspersed plenary sessions, including a joint ISUF-UDAL plenary session on urban design and research in Australia. The other plenary sessions were on the origins of Brisbane's urban form (Paul Sanders, QUT) and the evolution of its newer suburban developments (Tony Hall, Griffith University); the planning of informality, as exemplified by the city of Maputo (Jose Forjaz); the relationship between research and practice in urban morphology, in the context of the ISUF Task Force on this topic (Vitor Oliveira, Universidade do Porto); and finally, traditions, techniques and trends in urban morphology, a session in which the retiring President, Michael Conzen and the new President, Giancarlo Cataldi offered inspiring reflections on the discipline and its evolution (Figure 1).

For his part, Cataldi introduced a schematic model designed to summarize the Italian approach

to urban morphology. He first set about identifying five dialectic pairs: building types and building organism; project and construction; environmental insertion and reading; building materials and environment; and finally, time cycles and spatial scales. Such pairs allow, for instance, for a distinction to be drawn between the materiality of the architectural object (labelled the 'building organism') and its internalized mental representation (that is, the 'building type'), and between the 'raw' resources offered by the 'environment' and the 'building materials' that nature could supply when the said resources are fecundated by culture. By laying out the first four dialectic pairs to create a diamond-shaped figure, Cataldi then proceeded to illustrate a feedback loop – running along the four sides of the figure – that synthesized the oscillation between the concrete reality and its mental representations and between the inherited environment and its transformation through cognitive and embodied practices. In the last part of his presentation, Cataldi developed the schematic model further by incorporating time cycles and spatial scales. In doing so, he illustrated how, when aggregated, buildings create villages that would, in some cases, develop into towns and cities. In association with other artefacts deposited by history, such buildings, villages and cities form a 'whole', a cultural landscape that testifies to the geographical and cultural experience of the local population.

Conzen began his talk by defining urban morphology as 'the study of the built form of cities [which] seeks to explain the layout and spatial composition of urban structures and open spaces, their material character and symbolic meaning, in light of the forces that have created, expanded, diversified, and transformed them'. After briefly evoking early attempts at developing a systematic approach to the study of urban form during the nineteenth century and presenting a summary of genealogies of modern urban morphology in different national contexts, Conzen delivered his own attempt at synthesizing the multifaceted nature of the discipline. He did so in particular by producing interesting tables meant to chart how an array of physical and spatial objects have been studied with varying levels of intensity by using morphological approaches that have stemmed from, and borrowed from, a variety of disciplines. Conzen suggested that we should acknowledge the emerging geo-ecological approach in addition to the four initially identified by Karl Kropf, namely the process-typological approach of the Italian school, the historico-geographical approach

developed by the British school, the configurational approach of the Space Syntax school, and finally, the spatial-modelling methods based on mathematical simulation.

The ideas put forward by Conzen and Cataldi demonstrate the breadth and depth of morphological studies while shedding critical light on some of the complexities associated with any effort to define the scope of the discipline, leaving aside establishing what would constitute the core theoretical assumptions of a unified research programme.

To conclude his address, Conzen revisited Jeremy Whitehand's list of 'issues in urban morphology' for the benefit of ISUF 2013 participants. It is interesting to note how some of these issues permeated the conference, even if they were not formally addressed from a theoretical or epistemological standpoint, although a notable exception was the relationship between research and practice to which a plenary session was devoted. I have in mind in particular Euro-American myopia, the need for comparative studies, and, to a lesser extent, the over-reliance on urban morphological classics, if this theme can be understood to include 'a tendency to focus on traditional topical matter'.

The conference comprised 84 presentations, grouped according to six sub-themes: Cities on the edge; Off centre; On the edge of the city; Edge cities; Regional centres; and Pushing the edge. The play with the word 'edge' is amusing and endearing. However, the notion relates to a number of subjects that have been addressed recurrently at ISUF meetings, in particular in recent years. It is interesting to note, for instance, that the emergence and evolution of new urban forms at the periphery of seemingly ever-expanding metropolises appears to catch the attention of a growing number of morphologists. Such issues, which depart from the discipline's canonical work on multi-secular urban settlements, allow urban morphology to engage with conditions that are at the heart of the contemporary city's struggle to trace a path towards a more sustainable future with renewed relevance. The question of how new technologies and techniques are pushing at the edges of the empirical front while pointing to yet uncharted theoretical territories is similarly stimulating.

But the notion of 'edge' resonated in yet other ways in a conference held in Australia. I cannot resist the impulse of relaying a nice anecdote here. Conference organizer Paul Sanders had graciously accepted to share his impressions of ISUF 2013 immediately after the closing session. While

discussing over a coffee, he scribbled a world map in which the longitudinal central axis was meant to bisect Australia. Seen from such an unusual vantage point, UK and Continental Europe as well as the north-eastern part of North America appear in peripheral positions, whereas Australia and parts of Asia occupy a central location, while being surrounded by Africa and the Persian Gulf as well as South America. As expected by the organizing committee, due to its location the Brisbane conference attracted a very large percentage of contributions devoted to Australian and Asian cities and more broadly to urban realities in the southern hemisphere, taking into account in particular the Brazilian contributions. As usual, the African continent remained under-represented, although the participants had the privilege of hearing retired professor and planner Jose Forjaz speak at length about the planning challenges faced by Maputo in Mozambique.

By drawing attention to so-called geographical edges, ISUF 2013 did indeed spotlight parts of the world that are experiencing rapid and unbridled urbanization – urbanization that produces complex urban configurations in which the informal cohabits with the deliberately planned and where infrastructures that could instill a new spatial order in otherwise amorphous conurbations seem to linger a few steps behind urban development. As some of the papers illustrated, there might be more than strictly fortuitous resemblances between Chinese unregulated urban villages and Indian or Brazilian informal settlements; for similar conditions might well produce similar effects. Beyond the observation of the dramatic, yet predictable, social

and environmental problems that arise when the rapidity of development coincides with a paucity of means, such a juxtaposition of studies points to exciting prospects for urban morphology. First, these studies engage with urban realities that constitute a new terrain for the discipline, which translates into opportunities for methodological and theoretical advances. Secondly, they shed light on the potential fertility of conducting comparative studies of new spatial configurations produced by rapid urbanization in the different cultural and geographical contexts of the southern hemisphere. Thirdly, these studies generally aim to contribute to better understanding of the morphogenetic processes at play as well as to articulate proposals to remedy their shortcomings. Such a common interest in both fundamental and applied research calls for a further exchange of these reciprocal perspectives. It is also perfectly congruent with ISUF's often-repeated objective to favour the transfer of morphological knowledge into practice.

Let us thank the ISUF 2013 organizing committee for a very pleasant, well organized and most stimulating conference and, above all, for emphasizing problems and considerations that might very well move from the edges of our discipline to its core in the coming years.

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