

Twenty-Second International Seminar on Urban Form, Rome, Italy, 23–26 September 2015

The major ISUF Conference of 2015 had as its principal theme ‘City as organism: new visions for urban life’. It took place in Rome, perhaps one of the most organic cities in history. A remarkable event was therefore anticipated both in respect of discussion topics and venue.

It was indeed a remarkable conference, though by no means entirely in ways anticipated. Many speakers were coy about addressing explicitly the subject of cities as organisms and the sub-theme of ‘new visions for urban life’ was often no more than implicit, at least among the main presentations. Two of the keynote lectures that were arguably exceptions were the introductory presentations by Giuseppe Strappa and Michael Conzen. Strappa explored ‘The city as process: Rome’s urban form in transformation’, using the history of Rome as an example of organic process, emphasizing the rational side of city as organism (such as the metabolism of the city) and giving comparatively little attention to what he called the romantic side of the organic city. In contrast, Conzen’s extension of the organic aspect of the city was his proposal for inclusion of more ecological and environmental methods in the toolbox of ISUF as a fifth (geo-ecological) sub-field: the other four being process-typological, configurational, historico-geographical, and spatial modelling.

Two subsequent keynotes were attractive presentations of contemporary modernist architectural designs, one by Joao Luis Carrilho da Graca on ‘Terra,’ and the other by Max Dudler on ‘Density’. But they did not address the principal theme of the conference.

One can only speculate about the lack of a main-theme introduction to the conference given the fact that organic urban theory is considered one of five major influential approaches in urban theory and design (Lynch, 1984). Could it be that the particular theme of city as organism is a matter of contention between the two otherwise complementary directions of ISUF: Anglo-Saxon urban morphology and the Italian building typology school of thought? Arguably these two approaches have different perspectives concerning the city as organism. A look back to a contribution to *Urban Morphology* in 1998, in which M. R. G. Conzen responds to a comparative analysis of his own and Caniggia’s approach to urban morphology by Nicola Marzot (1998) would seem to support this

interpretation. For in Conzen’s view ‘the existence of a human settlement is a fundamentally different thing from the life of a human individual’ (Conzen, 1998, p. 113), apparently referring to the Caniggian treatment of a city as if it were an organism.

While the biological analogy of the city might be useful to some degree, it seems to be more appropriate and productive to take a modern perspective on the city as organism and the organic city, in which process, change, evolution, connections and complex relationships can provide a more specific and contemporary look at this topic.

Such a modern view can be based on several developments, such as systems theory, morphogenesis, holism, Eastern philosophies, and organicist theory, starting with Plato but continuing in a modern form with Alfred North Whitehead’s completely new process philosophy which he initially called the ‘philosophy of organism’. In this modern perspective, emphasis is on relationships and connections between the many elements in a city, for example activities, people and buildings, and processes within a system (or city) that can be likened to an organism or the organic city because of their life-creating and life-supporting processes on a higher level of organicity than the simple biological analogy. For Whitehead it is actually the relations that are primary: they are what the thing is and how it is defined (Whitehead, 1985, p. 39). In this way we have a world of relationships and processes of unfolding and evolution, forever changing and becoming.

While organicism and the organic city have a long history in writing and design application in the fields of philosophy, architecture, planning, geography, history and other disciplines, in this conference one had to visit as many sessions as possible in order to find more direct and rich discussion of, or references to, the main conference theme. It is also here that we found more visions and suggestions for new urban processes and urban life.

Discussions that were closest to exploring or exemplifying the ideas of an organic approach and theory could be found in the sessions on analysis of historic towns and the design of new towns, but most commonly in those on ecology and the city, the sustainable city, green areas and parks in the city, and open space and squares in the city, as well as a contribution in the session on urban form and

theories. The session on 'Urban landscapes' was promising ecologically, including a contribution on 'New forms of urban space in relation to nature' by Anna Bruno Menghini.

In a session on urban form and theories, Hajo Neis presented one of the few theories that deal directly with urban form and the creation of urban form in an organic approach with a contemporary perspective. Drawing on the book *A new theory of urban design* (Alexander *et al.*, 1987), the presentation in large part took seriously process-organism theory akin to Whitehead's philosophy of organism. It demonstrated how a city, or part of a city in this case, can be developed in a totally new way based on practical principles and rules that depend on connections and the right relationships to drive processes that generate dynamic urban growth. He also reported on how similar processes were applied in various other projects around the world.

In the afternoon sessions, several contributions can be highlighted that addressed the issue of city or building as organism in a direct or analogical fashion. 'The concept of organism in Louis Kahn's work' by Elisabeta Barizza was relevant to modern architectural legacies. Pierre Gauthier's discussion of street networks, spatial configurations and morphogenesis was directly relevant to organic urban structure and development. And Deniz Yilmaz

and Muejigan Karatosun discussed the calming process aspect of 'Slow city movement as a new approach in urban conservation'.

The second day of the conference was probably the most exciting for sessions and presentations that related in one form or another to city as organism and the organic city. The two sessions on public open space were full of references to the organic city: these included contributions on 'Public space as the generator of urban form' by Tarsicio Salcedo, 'Imagining new forms: urban morphology and design practice' by Michele Beccu, and the more analytical and historical paper on 'The Italian plaza: a model for comprehensive analysis' by Donald Corner and Jenny Young. In the architectural heritage session, Howard Davis reminded us about the importance of production within any city and its impact on architecture in his paper on 'Industrial morphologies: the historic London furniture industry and the new city of production'. And a day later Gian Luigi Maffei's paper could be related to this context. He analysed the 'Relationship between specialized buildings and urban form: changes and transformations of the contemporary world,' especially in relation to new service building relocation, concluding that a new phase in the organic evolution of cities may be under way.



Figure 1. Conference participants relax under the Roman gaze. Photograph by Kai Gu.

One of the most interesting discussions was generated in the evening session on 'Informal settlements', which included contributions on 'Spatial and organizational patterns in informal settlements', 'Understanding the city as a whole', and 'Informality of sprawl? Morphogenetic evolution in post-socialist Tirana'. The discussion addressed the issue of informal settlements as organic urban developments and how to support such a bottom-up direct approach to urban form and life formation. It was not surprising that this discussion was enthusiastically pursued by younger participants in the conference: one-third of urban inhabitants are estimated to live in informal settlements. Discussions on this and many other topics continued in the more relaxed, but historically more evocative, environment of the Gala dinner (Figure 1).

The last day of the conference was mostly dedicated to the new kind of city as organism or organic city that we associate with the green movement, including ecology, landscape, and sustainability of various kinds. Here the sessions on 'Reading contemporary landscape', 'Landscape and territories', 'Sustainable design and technologies', and 'Sustainable design' emphasized the importance of this new aspect of study and design within the ISUF range of interests. It was probably best exemplified by the paper on 'Towards a social-ecological urban morphology: integrating urban form and landscape ecology' by Lars Marcus and Meta Berghauser Pont. Also refreshing was the presentation by Alessandra Capuana on 'For a new organic city' which dealt with the traditional organic city in combination with elements of the new organic city, emphasizing connections, process and change.

In the end one has to ask what is to be learned from this rather fascinating conference with its intriguing, apparently controversial, title. I think we have to advance the notion of the organic city and city as organism to the next level in contemporary understanding. It actually becomes useful in helping to solve some of the huge problems that we are encountering with cities worldwide as we create new visions for urban life. That does not mean that traditional values of the organic city need to be thrown out, for they are still useful in many ways. But the organic city needs to be redefined and extended to become the new organic city: the city as process and relationships.

References

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