

Twenty-Third International Seminar on Urban Form, Nanjing, China, 8–10 July 2016

This was the second ISUF conference to be held in China. It was hosted by the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Nanjing University on the Gulou Campus, occupying precious green space within the historical walled area of Nanjing. The overarching theme of the conference was ‘Urban morphology and the resilient city’.

Nanjing was a suitable place for such a conference. The establishment of the city of Nanjing can be traced back about 2500 years. It lies on the western edge of the Yangtze River Delta, which is becoming the fastest urbanizing region in China (perhaps in the world). Its growth has been driven by strong economic forces. Its pace of growth has been accelerating, especially in last decade, and it is now a metropolis with a population of about 8 million. As a historical city under great development pressure, the urban form of Nanjing is being heavily challenged by a number of conflicts, for example between old and new, traditional and modern, conservation and redevelopment, and consolidation and expansion. For researchers and practitioners concerned with urban form, it is important to explore a resilient way to cope with these challenges.

Like the previous ISUF conference in China (in Guangzhou in 2009), this conference in Nanjing reflected in particular the major continuing endeavours of ISUF to promote the development of urban morphology in cultural areas outside those in Europe and North America where many of the ideas and methods originally developed.

Following the meeting of the ISUF Council immediately before the start of the Conference (Figure 1), eight plenary sessions and 35 paper sessions took place over three days, with 137 presentations, and more than 200 participants coming from 5 continents. As expected, Asia was the most represented part of the world, with about three-quarters of the papers presented emanating from this continent.

The keynote presentations were on ‘Urban morphology: taking the long view’ (Jeremy Whitehand, University of Birmingham); ‘Plan analysis of historical cities: a Sino-European comparison’ (Michael Conzen, University of Chicago); ‘Studies of Chinese traditional towns and the approach to urban morphology’ (Chen Zhao, Nanjing University); ‘Teaching urban morphology’ (Vitor Oliveira, Universidade do Porto);



Figure 1. ISUF Council discussing the progress report of the Advisory Committee on the Future Development of ISUF. Photograph by Youpei Hu.



Figure 2. A section of fringe belt adjacent to Nanjing's Ming city wall, with part of the city centre in the background. Photograph by Jinlong Feng.

'Florence: the geometry of urban form' (Giancarlo Cataldi, University of Florence); 'Principles of safe separation for planning between industrial and residential areas' (Weimin Que, Peking University); 'The epistemology of urban morphology' (Brenda Scheer, University of Utah); 'Urban management units and metabolism urban regeneration' (Yinsheng Tian, South China University of Technology).

For his part, Whitehand traced the development of urban morphology from the mid-nineteenth century, revealing the importance of contributions stemming mainly from three disciplines: geography, architecture and history. Early urban morphology was clearly multidisciplinary. In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, four schools of thought (Conzenian, Muratorian, Versailles and Berkeley) had formed and developed separately. To break this condition of mutual isolation, ISUF was inaugurated in the mid-1990s as a platform for communication among urban morphologists. The marked increase in the number of papers at the annual conferences, and in the journal *Urban Morphology*, and the numerous journals dealing with urban morphology in recent years reflect the growth of the discipline (Whitehand, 2012, p. 56). But more interdisciplinary communication is needed. In the last part of his address, Whitehand

illustrated current advances in, and possible future developments of, fringe-belt research, including in Nanjing (Figure 2). He built on early contributions by M. R. G. Conzen and his mentor Herbert Louis who had first recognized the fringe-belt concept in his paper of 1936 on the geographical structure of Greater Berlin. It was strongly suggested that better understanding of past developments of urban morphology would benefit decisions on its future development.

Conzen began his presentation by clarifying the aim of comparative urban morphology as being 'to distinguish both patterns and formative cultural processes that are universal from those that are more limited by geography, history, and local practice'. He highlighted the value of the approach of plan analysis in 'making sense of the extremely complex patterns contained in accurate, large-scale urban maps' and providing 'a fundamental template upon which further morphological study can proceed'. He described his recent comparative research on the Chinese city of Pingyao and the Italian city of Como that he had undertaken in collaboration with Jeremy Whitehand and ISUF Secretary-General Kai Gu. He posited that the principal cultural factors about values based on cosmology, as well as the differing perceptions of public and private in urban society, were essential

to understanding contrasts of urban form between East and West.

The paper sessions were grouped in relation to nine topics: (1) Urban morphological theory; (2) Urban morphology and urban design/planning; (3) Urban form, society and technology; (4) The fringe-belt concept; (5) Urban morphology, sustainability, and climatic change; (6) Transformation and resilience in urban development; (7) Urban form in the global era; (8) Urban form in Asia; and (9) East and West: similarities and contrasts.

Topics 3, 7 and 8 were addressed by the largest number of papers. To appreciate the potentially interrelated character of these superficially fairly discrete topics it is helpful to bear in mind M. R. G. Conzen's tripartite division of the urban landscape into first, the town plan, secondly, the building fabric, and thirdly, land and building utilization. Comprising streets, plots and building block-plans, the town plan forms the inescapable framework for the other man-made features of urban form (Conzen, 1960, pp. 3–4; Whitehand, 2001, p. 104), as was evident from Michael Conzen's keynote presentation.

Topic 2, focusing on the scope of urban morphology in practice, contained numerous presentations. Several papers dealt with creative projects, with somewhat individual traits, that were idealistically trying to transform current socio-economic requirements into concrete reality. A recurrent feature was the paucity of wider environmental understanding. In this respect, it is believed that urban morphology as a systematic research approach could make more contributions in future. Several presentations prompted reflection on the scope for further developing quantitative approaches in urban morphology and the prospect of their more direct and effective application in design and planning practice.

In relation to changes in urban form, papers dealing with topics 5 and 6 contained several interesting explorations. With exacerbation of the global environmental crisis, a number of related concerns, such as carbon emissions, energy efficiency and climatic change, are being considered in relation to conservation and the reshaping of existing urban forms. And it is anticipated that urban morphological research will aid realization of the ideal of the sustainable resilient city through exploration of valuable experience of past successes and failures embodied in the existing physical environment.

Addressing comparisons between East and West, topic 9 contained papers discussing such

matters as ancient times, religious sites and urban cores. Problems of non-comparability of definitions, methods and concepts evidently still remain (Whitehand, 2012, p. 60). However, there is a continuing process of developing general principles within the conceptual frameworks of urban morphology. This is benefiting mutual understanding of the distinctive geographical regions of East and West, and giving direction to their further morphological exploration.

In addition to the formal paper sessions, much valuable interaction took place between participants informally: for example, during coffee breaks, lunches, social events and the welcome conference dinner held in a wonderful atmosphere. This included discussions between those from widely differing cultural-geographical regions of the world.

Immediately following the conference, many participants took part in one-day excursions. One such excursion in the old city of Nanjing included visits to the campus of Nanjing University, located in the middle fringe belt; Jiming temple located in the Ming fringe belt; the fixation line of the city wall constructed in the Ming dynasty; and the Ganxi residence located in the commercial area in the southern part of the walled city. The latter contained a large group of courtyard houses originally constructed in 1796–1821 by the previously powerful Gan clan.

Sincere thanks are extended to the ISUF 2016 organizing committee for their great endeavours to arrange a smooth, thought-provoking conference. They have raised our expectations as we look forward to the ISUF 2017 Conference in Valencia, Spain.

References

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