

Introduction

The Second C.E.U. World Congress this year took as its theme sustainable urbanism. It looked at sustainable urbanism at a number of scales and from a number of perspectives: teasing out environmental, economic and social aspects then knitting them back together to consider the kinds of holistic approaches needed to make Europe's cities, towns, villages and countryside more sustainable in future. There were some great examples from practice as well as some terrific ideas from theory, presented over two intensive days of discussion and debate among a wide range of participants from across Europe and beyond. The sessions were organised to allow plenty of time for interaction between all the participants and this greatly enriched the quality of the debate.

We began by setting the scene – including the background of C.E.U.'s concern for humane urbanism – as summed up in our Stockholm Charter. I noted in introducing the Congress that last year, when we reviewed the European city and considered its prospects, we identified that urban sustainability was one of the most urgent concerns facing us. So this year it made sense to explore aspects of sustainability in considerable detail, as discussed in summary in this rapporteur's report.

This report though is just a precursor to the Proceedings from the Congress, which are due to be compiled into a book that will be available in due course in both hard copy and electronic formats. Nor does this summary follow strictly the Congress structure; instead it tries to explore key themes and threads that emerged about different aspects of sustainable urbanism over the two days. I should also make clear that as a short summary it cannot hope to do justice to all the great contributions of presenters and participants and of course any errors are my own.

A survey of Congress themes

A key theme was sprawl. We considered sprawl of different kinds – and heard that this was clearly not a natural phenomenon but one propped up by a framework of social and economic incentives. Professor Harald Bodenschatz and Professor Harald Kegler began the first session with an analysis of the problem of suburbanisation and the political resistance to changing that unsustainable urban form. Peter Elmlund reminded us that this related to technocratic solutions based on Fordist/Taylorist principles. When the methods of big scale industrialisation were adapted to urbanism they tended to produce places that didn't work. Bigness was often a problem. He argued that neo-traditional urbanism of our time is very much related to the counter culture so while both environmentalists and urbanists have the same roots, the former group does not understand urban form. These approaches were clearly related to the notion of the tabula rasa. As the Deputy Lord Mayor of Leeds Cllr Jack Dunn said in opening day two, this was the "result of clearing away the past before knowing what the future would be like".

We heard from Professor Bodenschatz that even in cities that were shrinking in population terms there is spatial sprawl. We saw some existing, new and emerging low-density typologies, which provoked some questions: Are garden suburbs a less noxious form of sprawl than some others? Will the Dutch typology of castles in a country park take over from

towers in a green park? There was virtual unanimity that we need to find ways to rebuild more densely to reduce energy consumption and - given the scale of the issues - properly design urban regions in more sustainably dense ways.

Modern(ist) approaches to road planning came in for some well-deserved stick. And Leeds itself provided something of a potted history of now discredited approaches by the tabula rasa method. Participants at the Congress will remember the marvellously revealing slide Dr Lindsay Smales showed of "Leeds: Britain's Motoring City of the 1970s" with its spaghetti junctions and wholesale fabric clearance to make way for motorways dotted with the occasional car. We saw plenty of other examples of car dependency built into Leeds urban fabric – post Buchanan's famous 1963 Traffic in Towns study. And we saw peripheral housing, business park and retailing developments from Leeds and elsewhere based on such traffic planning assumptions. Dendritic road patterns were contrasted with clever design to incorporate - but also limit - car parking, and make workable, walkable, grid-based and highly connected streets instead.

There was a focus on making sustainable centres, neighbourhoods, and edges - including polycentric examples. These were places where it would be possible to achieve a dense activity mix within the terms of the compact city paradigm, based loosely on the European City Model. As Dr Rachael Unsworth explained, in developing or redeveloping within this urban structure, those who make and remake urban space need to find ways to "dematerialise and re-localise". In other words we need to reduce our obsession with consumption and focus our lives more on the places we are in – based on local, walkable catchments.

There was a concentration of attention on sustainable development from the macro to micro scale of the region down to various housing and other built form typologies – as Peter Drijver pointed out these can be very long term. At the micro scale Kelvin Campbell showed how subtle and robust townhouse typologies could be. Peter Drijver counter-pointed a situation in which sustainable building forms and techniques – used over the very long term in the Netherlands to detail row housing for example - have become illegal because they now fail to meet codes for access, and how this contrasts with a commonsense understanding of sustainability by lay people.

A key theme was walkability and accessibility and it was suggested that public transport could act as a framework for urban structure. As Dr Matthew Hardy pointed out, on the demand side it is better to put your money into the appreciating asset of an accessible house, not a depreciating car, especially as in order to afford to buy both house and car people have to locate further from jobs and services, in turn increasing commuting car use. But we also heard from Leeds that good urbanism can be scuppered on the supply side by a lack of financial support for public transport infrastructure.

We heard that good urbanism can heal urban spaces. Irit Solzi showed how regeneration efforts in Jerusalem have acted to deal with what she described as harsh urban conditions to make the place more sustainable – environmentally, economically and socially – through contextual design to repair both the urban fabric and the street system.

As a writer about food and city form I was especially pleased to see a focus on market halls and other food spaces. This discussion was contextualised by consideration of approaches to consumption. Peter Drijver suggested we need to "move from a culture of waste to a culture of permanence" and Professor Julio Cesar Perez connected the former to unconstrained

approaches to consumption. Part of that was about urban food production – allotments were mentioned as a traditional urban form with a long and distinguished history but now at risk of being built over in area renewal schemes. Other good examples from European cities of urbanism centred on food included a market hall typology as a new social generator in a Dutch town, the Leeds covered market as social centre, John Thorp's "urban design by the pizza method", that Leeds' urban edge was defined in one direction by forced rhubarb beds, and the counter-pointing of these approaches by "fast food suburbia".

A plea was made for "a new norm" which supports ordinary background buildings – what Peter Drijver has elsewhere called "invisible architecture". John Thorp reported one Leeds lady as saying subversively about a new building, "I really like this. It's so inoffensive". This was contrasted with the idea still current that John Thorp quoted to the effect that: "a modern city needs modern buildings" and the stylistic policing toward anti-contextualism that this implies. As Hank Dittmar said, principles of traditional urbanism are about "celebrating and understanding the DNA of place" and should lead to "context sensitive solutions".

Fine-grained, compact design was seen as important in responding to sharpening problems of climate change. We had some discussion of good examples – prototypes, typologies and codes - that represented best practice. The Katrina hurricane emergency housing, the Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems, and the renegotiated road system in Stockholm (this last presented by Dr Anders Soderlind) come to mind. These tended to place emphasis on fine-grained design of the urban neighbourhood with close attention to subdivision, block and housing typologies based on well managed, grid based urban forms. It was interesting to see that residents in one scheme in Ashford, UK, shown by Kelvin Campbell were prepared to choose the most compact option for urban development (which was by the way based on the European City Model) when they had a chance to really engage from very early on in the design process and see the kinds of choices they would make by going for a lower density option. So that early engagement of stakeholders was an important lesson.

The other lesson Kelvin drew was about medium versus high-rise. The Ashford scheme demonstrated that it was possible to achieve suitably dense scale with low to medium rise buildings. The idea that density can only be achieved through high rise was shown to be a myth. In fact the Congress participants saw high rises as on a continuum from dreadful to interesting. John Thorp described the current boom in high rise in Leeds as "its San Gimignano moment" – whereas Dr Matthew Hardy countered that these were notable for being among the few towers left in Italian towns – thus not a good advertisement for the longevity of the building type. Dr Hardy also made a plea to avoid "fantasy sustainability" – with high-rise again seen as in reality unable to deliver sustainability despite bold claims by proponents. High rise could not hit what Hank Dittmar called the sustainability "sweet spot". Instead, he said, built form should focus on reflecting city pride and identity.

We discussed the importance of the urban landscape, focusing on the unbuilt as well as the built. There were interesting points made about the role of urban landscaping – and clever landscaping will be increasingly important in the context of urban flooding exacerbated by climate change. It was suggested that we can keep developing on flood plains but we will need to do so with better design quality in future. We debated what constituted real sustainability – and identified some confusion between environmental performance and a broader, more holistic notion of sustainability. We heard quite a lot about being green – green corridors, biodiversity corridors, green drainage, and green urbanism. The right approach was

described by Professor Michael Hebbert "as a sandwich filling, not a sauce to slather over everything". Maybe that is another way to say we should watch out for and avoid greenwash.

Dr Matthew Hardy talked about "extreme sustainability" providing a slightly apocalyptic vision in support of walkable compact space. He suggested there were four questions we would need to be able to answer in future: Where does food come from? How do you stay warm in winter? How far can you walk and what can you get in that radius? And How can you fix your house with stuff from within 400 metres? Others too delved into the challenges for a more sustainable future – both to recover from disasters (Hurricane Katrina being a recent example) and avoid or mitigate them in days to come. And Ben Bolgar suggested, in the light of Sir Nicholas Stern's findings, sustainable urbanism is a model to avoid massive global poverty that will otherwise inevitably be a most adverse effect of climate change.

Then there was the problem of short-termism. One of the facets we explored in achieving such changes was a problem of timeframes. As both Hank Dittmar and I noted, we have short-term political and financial cycles but cities need to consider sustainable development outcomes over the long haul. Just as cities layer and evolve over time, their sustainability needs to be thought of as a complex series of overlays that take a considerable time to unfold.

At the same time cities, it seemed, could be laboratories for urbanism. Thus, it was evident that both the evolving urban form of Leeds and the planned Expo site in Newcastle to the north east, act as rich urban laboratories for design ideas, although in Leeds' case some of the outcomes have been pretty scary (1960s road plans among them). Much more appealing was Harald Kegler's notion of experiments in temporary architectural forms to explore sustainability solutions. I pondered whether his ideas about the "Miami Bauhaus" might be the acceptable face of modernism in city design.

So how best to go about such work? Kelvin Campbell suggested that there was a fear of master plans (that may be peculiar to the UK) but participants also accepted their undoubted value along with codes and sustainable design guides, as being pursued by the Prince's Foundation, CABI and others.

Better design implied better skills to deliver sustainable urbanism. We talked about the skills to deliver a more sustainable urbanist agenda, particularly topical in the light of the skills symposium also underway in Leeds over the same timeframe as the Congress, being run by the Congress's main sponsor, the Academy for Sustainable Communities. And in the last panel discussion the related issue of education came up, with a plea for design based on places, not solely computer aided design, to thoroughly explore the *genus loci* of each place. This was in line with C.E.U.'s 2004 Visé Declaration on the Teaching of Architecture and Urbanism in the Age of Globalisation and a good note to end on.

In conclusion

In conclusion, the Second International Congress of the Council for European Urbanism provided an excellent opportunity to present and to hear about a wealth of ideas, views, lessons and possibilities for more sustainable urbanism in line with C.E.U.'s Charter of Stockholm. Next year we intend to reinforce the sustainability message about humane urbanism when our third international Congress – due to be held in Oslo in September 2008 - will focus on urbanism and climate change.

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