

Conference report

From control to co-evolution The AESOP Congress 2014, Utrecht, 9–12 July 2014

The Association of European Schools of Planning – AESOP – is the largest academic organisation on spatial planning in Europe, and its annual conferences are the most important events throughout the year. ‘From control to co-evolution’ was the theme of this year’s AESOP congress in Utrecht (Netherlands) from 9–12 July, 2014. It was hosted as a joint project by the University of Utrecht, the Delft University of Technology, and the University of Ghent under the supervision of Luuk Boelens, Vincent Nadin and Thomas Hartmann. Almost 700 researchers across all planning-related areas from Europe and beyond gathered to present, listen and discuss within seventeen parallel tracks, from ‘planning in stressful places’ to ‘ethics and justice in planning’. Four related papers were presented in each session, followed by lively discussions about ideas, approaches and even connections between them.

Traditionally, those paper sessions form the core of AESOP congresses, but additionally, several innovations have been introduced in Utrecht to the established AESOP conference procedures. In particular, pitch sessions were new for AESOP at this year’s gathering: presenters had a time slot of five minutes each to present new research ideas or work in progress. Those sessions turned out to be very lively and appealing platforms, in which not only younger academics presented preliminary findings but also eminent professors, such as Klaus Kunzmann (*TU Dortmund*) and Luuk Boelens (*University of Ghent*).

Venue

Bert van de Zwaan, the rector magnificus of Utrecht University, opened the congress. Utrecht University is one of the oldest and nowadays the second-largest university in the Netherlands. The campus is an architectural highlight of the city and contains works of famous Dutch architects, like Rem Koolhaas, Wiel Arets and Herman Hertzberger. Spatial planning at Utrecht is integrated into the geoscience department. The education of planners (Bachelors and Masters) is strongly linked with the field of human geography. The opening reception took place at the Dutch National

Railway Museum – fascinating scenery with an industrial ambience. The conference was concluded by a farewell dinner at the famous Academy Building in the shadow of the Dom Church of Utrecht.

Congress theme: ‘From control to co-evolution’

The congress has continued AESOP’s tradition of broaching an essential discussion about planning as a discipline. The question – whether planning has developed from control to co-evolution – tackles the fundamental contemporary role played by planners. The theme refers to a broader academic debate, to a local characteristic of the Utrecht approach and also links with other AESOP congresses. The link to the academic debate in planning theory is the debate on the complexity of social-spatial systems. The congress participants were challenged to reflect on the question regarding to what degree planning theory, practice and education have progressed from technocratic understandings and methods. The different tracks achieved this through their particular focus – for example, ‘planning, law, and property rights’ from a different perspective than ‘adaptive Delta studies and governance’. The theme also refers to the work by Boelens (*University of Ghent*), head of the local organising committee, and Kreukels (*Utrecht University*) on the actor-relational approach (Boelens, 2010). The chosen topic also fits within a pattern of themes chosen for previous congresses (for example, Dublin 2013: ‘Planning for resilient cities and regions’) and future AESOP congresses. In 2015, when AESOP goes to Prague, the theme will be ‘Definite space – fuzzy responsibility’. These themes represent the mission of AESOP to continue the fundamental discourse about planners’ identity. Some of the presented papers at Utrecht picked up the theme; others did not address it at all.

Keynotes

The keynote speakers tried to reveal the theme from different perspectives. Inspired by the film *Blade Runner*, the participants learnt about the commonalities between science fiction and spatial planning. Keynote speaker Daniele Archibugi (*University of London*) philosophised on which innovation would prove the next big thing in shaping human development over the coming decades. According to some scenes of the 1982 film, the last thirty years was predicted to be affected by two technologies: new communications technologies and bioengineering. Looking at today’s youth, 50 per cent of this cinematic forecast has been proven true, even though the development of communication technologies was heavily underestimated. The second keynote speaker, John Urry (*Lancaster University*), gave a keynote on ‘complex systems and multiple crises of

energy'. Urry is a sociologist and provoked the audience with his particular view on spatial planning.

As a special feature, the organisers arranged a planning film festival in cooperation with the Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam (AFFR). Seven films related to spatial planning were shown, including the keynote film *Unfinished Italy* on modern building ruins in Italy. The film referred to planning problems of today and related planning disasters, uncertainty and complexity in planning. The wide scope of planning-related films and the pleasant atmosphere at the film festival provided a welcome variation to the established structure.

Mobile workshops

Another feature of this congress was the opportunity to attend the full-day mobile tracks about particular topics related to the conference theme. These were more than excursions; they have consistently been part of the academic programme of the congress and can be labelled as a highlight. Participants from all over the world experienced the challenges and solutions of the Dutch planning system in eight different workshops. The workshops brought the people to Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Nijmegen or Almere, or allowed delegates to just stay and walk or bike in Utrecht. Different topics were addressed, such as flood risk management, smart cities, integrated rail-urban redevelopment or governance structures. Besides classic visits and presentations about the particular projects, many workshops were arranged interactively. In the Almere tour, for instance, the participants reflected their impressions in a World Café format. This intense exchange of experiences was an excellent opportunity to give valuable feedback to the local actors. The mobile tracks demonstrated modern planning activities in the country that have been referred to as a 'planners' paradise' (Faludi and Valk, 1994, 26).

AESOP awarded prizes for research and teaching

At the congress, the AESOP Best Published Paper Award 2014 went to Graham Haughton, Phil Allmendinger and Stijn Oosterlynck for the paper 'Spaces of neoliberal experimentation: soft spaces, postpolitics, and neoliberal governmentality' published in *Environment and Planning A*. The AESOP Excellence in Teaching Award 2014 went to Olivier Sykes for the course titled 'International planning studies', run at the University of Liverpool (Civic Design).

Quo vadis AESOP?

At the general assembly, AESOP's outgoing president, Geert de Roo (*University of Groningen*), sketched the future development of the association. The two upcoming challenges are digitalisation and the promotion of young academics. As a first step, the new platform 'InPlanning' was presented – this will be a central source where information on planning, including selected books, journals, articles and even video lectures will be made available (www.inplanning.eu). The project is in line with the Five Futures Strategy of AESOP's new president, Francesco Lo Piccolo (*University of Palermo*), who was inaugurated with a wonderful serenade for his birthday. At his side, Paulo Pinho (*University of Porto*) assumed the post of vice-secretary general.

AESOP's future: the Young Academics

For the first time, the Young Academics (YA) organised their own general assembly during AESOP proceedings during which the coordination team informed and debated about several current projects. Lauren Uğur (*TU Darmstadt*) announced that, as a result of the great success of the Young Academics special issue in *Planning Practice and Research* (2014, Volume 29, Issue 3), the association is ready to take the next step with their own online journal. The name *PlaNext* already indicates that the journal is meant as an opportunity for the next generation of planners to publish research results. The peer-reviewed journal will have two volumes per year: one as a follow-up of the annual YA conference and one with an open call. Supported by special issue guest editor Jeffery Hou (*University of Washington*), the first edition has been published recently¹ and contains five papers presented at the Gothenburg YA conference in 2014. Additionally, the YA network have launched their own book series 'Conversations with planners' consisting of three tracks:

- introducing thinkers for planners;
- conversations in planning theory; and
- conversations in planning practice.

Finally, during the YA general assembly, the first YA Best Paper Prize was awarded, supported by the *Journal of Urban Design and Planning*. The AESOP Young Academics Best Paper Prize 2014 was awarded to Ioanna Katapidi for the paper 'Perceiving heritage: the case of Greek traditional settlements'. The paper will be published in the *Journal of Urban Design and Planning*.

¹ See: http://reader.inplanning.eu/web/viewer.html?file=/test/pdfs/PlaNext_journal.pdf.

PhD workshop

Just before the main conference in Utrecht, thirty-four PhD students gathered in an idyllic environment on a farm near Delft for a workshop organised by the TU Delft and the Young Academics (represented by Ender Peker and Nadia Caruso). The young researchers were supported by motivated mentors, who provided their professional know-how and personal experiences in bilateral talks and general inputs. Cecilia Wong (*University of Manchester*) placed emphasis on the relationships between supervisors and PhD students. Stefanie Dühr (*Nijmegen University*) reflected on the role of research questions in PhD projects. Wil Zonneveld (*TU Delft*) added hints for proper research designs, and Karel Meier (*Prague Technical University*) discussed the question of what science and planning are. Karl Fischer (*University of New South Wales*), Vincent Nadin (*TU Delft*) and Tuna Tasan-Kok (*TU Delft*) addressed the publication-based PhD, which caused a very lively debate about the role of publications in science in general and the different related strategies. Paulo Pinho (*University of Porto*) and Kristina Nielson (*University Lulea*) were looking for reasons why some PhD projects are never finished. In order to prevent this, the workshop was organised into small working groups, in which young and experienced researchers discussed different PhD projects. The PhD workshop was an enriching event for all persons involved and was highlighted by a communal viewing of how the Dutch team fared in the World Cup and some vocal numbers by Akkelies van Nes (*TU Delft*).

Outlook on 2015

The next AESOP annual conference will be hosted by the University of Prague, from 12–19 July, 2015. Zdeněk Zavřel, Karel Meier and their team are looking forward to discussing planning issues under the topic ‘Definite space – fuzzy responsibility’. For more information, check www.aesop2015.eu. The connected PhD workshop will be organised as a cross-border project by the STU Bratislava and will take place in Stara Lesna, in the north of Slovakia.

A final note

What has the ASEOP conference in Utrecht taught us? Co-evolution seems to be a topic that has entered our academic discipline, and the Netherlands remains a wonderful host for an international audience, even if they did not win the World Cup. The new format introduced at Utrecht enriched the traditional scheme and could contribute to a diversified programme; however, not all innovations are suitable for other venues – the film festival might remain an exception at AESOP conferences. The pitch sessions, however, might be worthy of co-evolving further.

Beyond this, the congress achieved what it ought to achieve: Utrecht succeeded in creating an atmosphere and environment where such exchange was facilitated. After all, AESOP is, and has to be, a platform for knowledge exchange and discussion. In this respect, one has to acknowledge that AESOP at Utrecht successfully accomplished its mission. See you next year in Prague (www.aesop2015.eu).

References

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